

WINGATE'S RAIDERS

AN ACCOUNT
OF THE INCREDIBLE ADVENTURE
THAT RAISED THE CURTAIN
ON THE BATTLE FOR BURMA

By

CHARLES J. ROLO

With Forewords by

FIELD-MARSHAL VISCOUNT WAVELL OF CYRENAICA AND
WINCHESTER, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C.

and

BRIGADIER-GENERAL HORACE S. SEWELL, C.M.G., D.S.O.



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FOREWORD

BY FIELD-MARSHAL VISCOUNT WAVELL OF CYRENAICA AND
WINCHESTER, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C.

THE man to whose genius this book is a tribute has been killed in the course of a flight between his forward units in Burma and his headquarters in India. His manner of death may be termed characteristic of the man; like all good commanders, he was prepared to take considerable risks to establish personal touch with his forward troops; to his impetuous nature darkness and storm were no impediments to flying or reasons for delay. To what mischance the catastrophe was due can never be known. After a meteoric career he fell as the meteor falls—sudden, swift, unaccountable.

I first met Wingate in 1937 when I took over the command in Palestine. He was then on the Intelligence staff. His name at once caught my attention, since as a young officer I had known and admired his relation, General Sir Reginald Wingate. I was not then aware of his connexion with T. E. Lawrence, whom I had known well, but I realized at once that there was a remarkable personality in the rather untidy young officer with the piercing eyes who was obviously no respecter of persons because of their rank, and had no hesitation in putting forward unorthodox views and maintaining them. I did not see a great deal of Wingate in Palestine—the exploits for which he received the D.S.O. took place after I left for a Command in England; but his personality was pigeon-holed in my mind as that of a leader for unorthodox enterprise, if I ever had need of one.

Accordingly in 1940 when I was looking for a leader to supplement the efforts of Colonel Sandford in encouraging the rebels in Abyssinia, and heard that Wingate was available, I at once cabled for him. The average person probably looks on guerilla warfare as a haphazard, shiftless affair. Actually it requires just as careful preparation as any other operation of war, and no one realized this better than Wingate. Before his entry into Abyssinia months were spent in accumulating arms and provisions and transporting them across the low country on to the high escarpment before the rains broke. "Give me more camels or there will be no rebellion" was the constant burden of his reports. I should like to have seen the first meeting between Sandford and Wingate when the latter flew in to an improvised landing-strip in the heart of Abyssinia. Few people looked more like a fiery leader of partisans than Wingate, few looked less like one than Sandford—solid, bespectacled,

benevolent—who was in his way as bold and as active as Wingate. They were both gunners. I need not write here of Wingate's brilliant work in Abyssinia. When it was all over he sent to my headquarters a memorandum that would almost have justified my placing him under arrest for insubordination. My staff were, to put it mildly, pained at its tone. I sent for Wingate and had out with him as man to man the grievances he had voiced. Some were misunderstandings, a few were real and could be remedied, some more were imaginary. That was the last time I saw him in the Middle East—he bore evidence of the great strain to which he had been subjected, which put him into hospital for some time shortly afterwards.

Nearly a year later, when I was struggling to check the Japanese advance through Burma, I thought again of Wingate and cabled for him to come and organize irregular activities against the Japanese communications. He arrived shortly before we were driven out of Burma, too late to undertake any enterprise but in sufficient time for his active brain to grasp the essentials of fighting in Burma. Shortly after the withdrawal he put up to me a paper on the formation of a Long Range Penetration Group for action against the enemy's communications. I accepted his proposals, but warned him that I could give him no picked troops. The results are told in this book. Mr Rolo's account is not the whole story, and there are some inaccuracies and omissions in it; this is inevitable in a narrative written so close in time to the events and so far in space from them. But it gives an absorbing and vivid picture of a great adventure.

It may be said that the expedition had no strategical object. This is true. When it was originally planned it was linked with a much larger scheme, in which it would have played a vital part. For certain reasons the larger scheme could not be undertaken. This was why I held a conference for nearly two hours with Wingate at Imphal before deciding that the expedition should proceed. I had to balance the inevitable losses—the larger since there would be no other operations to divide the enemy's forces—to be sustained without strategical profit, against the experience to be gained of Wingate's new methods and organization. I had little doubt in my own mind of the proper course, but I had to satisfy myself that Wingate had no doubts also and that the enterprise had a good chance of success and would not be a needless sacrifice, and I went into Wingate's proposals in some detail before giving the sanction to proceed for which he and his brig were waiting. In spite of the casualties of the gathering I am quite sure that it

request to continue and my decision to allow him were right, and paid a dividend in invaluable experience.* While his brigade was still in Burma I ordered the formation of another brigade on similar lines.

Now he has gone, but his work remains. He was a strange character. I cannot claim to have known him intimately, our contacts were almost wholly during the high pressure of war and on an official basis, and I do not think that he was an easy man to know. But I have no doubt about his genius as a leader, or his magnetic personality. He had a gift, too, of speech and words. This is how he ended the Order of the Day which he issued to his columns as they crossed the Chindwin on February 17:

Finally, knowing the vanity of man's effort and the confusion of his purpose, let us pray that God may accept our services and direct our endeavours, so that when we have done all we shall see the fruits of our labours and be satisfied.

He saw the blossom and the first fruit of his labours, but not the final harvest of victory over the Japanese barbarian, to which he will have made so striking a contribution.

WAVELL

FOREWORD

BY BRIGADIER-GENERAL HORACE S. SEWELL, C.M.G., D.S.O.

WHEN the first reports appeared of a British expedition which for three months had fought behind the Japanese lines in Burma few people had ever heard of its commander, Brigadier, afterwards Major-General, Orde Charles Wingate. In *Wingate's Raiders* we have for the first time a picture of this extraordinary man and a concise account of the campaign he planned and led, a campaign-unique in the annals of warfare.

The author has spent a good deal of time with officers who played key rôles in the expedition; his story is based on their personal experiences—where possible it is told in their own words—and on all the available documents about the expedition. There are points in the narrative where specific details have deliberately been omitted; the Wingate expedition still bristles with military secrets which the Japs are singularly eager to fathom. Wingate's officers and the author have taken pains to tell their story without answering any of the questions that are plaguing the Japanese High Command in Burma.

Wingate, like all great leaders, was a believer in thorough training. The publication of this book seems to me very timely in that it shows how he conditioned his men for an ordeal that is typical of the fighting confronting the Allies in the Far Eastern theatre of war. The reader can derive encouragement from the fact that nothing is being neglected that will season and equip the Allied troops in India for jungle warfare under the most gruelling conditions. It is also heartening to realize that the bulk of the troops with whom Wingate singed the Mikado's beard were second-line troops who had never before seen action.

From the start the Wingate expedition encountered terrain which any less resolute commander would have considered impassable. There is no real road from India into Burma. The Arakan Yoma Range stretching down from Tibet—the 'roof of the world' where India, Burma, and China meet—separates Assam from Northern Burma. It was across this rugged country that the expedition marched on its way down to the Chindwin and on the return journey three months later.

Charles Rolo's description of the view from the high passes looking across the ranges into Burma gives a vivid picture of the

beauty of these wild mountains. It is easy to realize what a formidable barrier they would present to the passage of a conventional army. It was only with difficulty that the pack animals, which took the place of motor transport in the Wingate expedition, could negotiate the steep, narrow paths, which constitute the only route to the Upper Chindwin.

Burma is virtually isolated from the outside world by geographical features. In the west lies the Arakan Yoma Range, mentioned above, and the very narrow, malarial coastal strip of Arakan. In the east, along the Chinese frontier, rises difficult mountain terrain made familiar by pictures of the Burma Road. On the Thailand frontier the Shan Plateau presents a serious obstacle to military movements, except in the south. It was there the Japanese invaded Burma, and this is the real route to China.

Within these boundaries lies an area slightly larger than France. Mountain ranges running from north to south break the country into valleys traversed by great rivers. Largest of these are the Irrawaddy, navigable for nine hundred miles; the Chindwin, which joins the Irrawaddy some fifty miles below Mandalay; and the Salween, which flows through the Shan States in the east. All three rivers run north-south.

The population of Burma, roughly sixteen millions, is most densely concentrated in the broad, dry valley between Prome and Mandalay, in the Irrawaddy delta, and in the coastal strip which runs south between the Bay of Bengal and Thailand. Two-thirds of the inhabitants are Burmese proper, the rest Indians, Karens, Shans, Kachins, Chins, and other hill tribesmen.

The strategic objectives of an invasion of Burma are twofold; to rid the country of Japanese and to bring aid to China. It is worth stressing that merely by opening the Burma Road the Allies will not have done much to assist the Chinese. The carrying capacity of the road at its best is only about two hundred tons per day, not enough to supply half the ammunition alone required by an army division in action. Long-range Allied plans to render effective aid to China must envisage not merely opening the Burma Road but sweeping the Japanese out of Burma, Thailand, and French Indo-China.

Such an offensive would necessitate a two or more pronged drive. Strong columns organized like Wingate's might again take the forbidding land route across the Arakan mountains. Their task would be to liquidate the Japanese in Northern Burma, secure control of its aerodromes for the Allies, and then safeguard the flank

of the sea-borne armies striking at the main Japanese defence line between Mandalay and Bangkok. Rangoon, on the Irrawaddy delta, is the traditional gateway to Burma. Invasion landings—impossible on the Arakan coast—could be made in the delta or at Moulmein or Tavoy farther south. From there an advance east into Thailand would cut at one blow both the railway which the Japanese are reported to be building between Bangkok and Burma, and the enemy's rail communications with Malaya. It was from Thailand that the Japs invaded Burma, and it is through Thailand that their main communications pass. A successful blow in that area, followed through to French Indo-China, would wound the enemy in a crucial spot and open the doorway to China.

A full-scale offensive of this type would encounter the most determined opposition from a well-entrenched enemy. While bearing in mind that the lessons so bitterly learned in 1942 have been duly taken to heart—as evidenced by the success of the Wingate expedition—it would be well to recall the difficulties encountered by the Allies in that unhappy campaign.

After Pearl Harbour, when reinforcements were rushed to Burma from India and Africa, they took with them their normal transport, which was not designed for campaigning in jungle country. The Japanese, who had planned the invasion of Malaya and Burma very carefully, were perfectly equipped for jungle-fighting. They greatly outnumbered the British, but it was in equipment and tactics, more than in numbers, that they had their chief advantage. The British and Indian troops were tied to the roads by their motorized transport, a condition which the enemy exploited to the full, and the fine regiments which took part in this campaign fought at a disadvantage from the start. General Alexander realized this as soon as he arrived, but it was then too late to reorganize the transport system.

The experience of my old regiment, the Seventh Hussars, who fought with Alexander during the retreat from Rangoon to the borders of Assam, is typical of that of many others. The records of this rearguard action are filled with the sinister phrase 'road block,' a Japanese tactic which contributed largely to our undoing in Burma. Within two days of landing at Rangoon the Hussars were in action at Pegu. They soon found that all their communication lines had been severed by road blocks erected by enemy parties who had filtered through the jungle. Three times the Hussars sent their tanks hurtling at the great barricade formed of

and logs. Twice blazing tanks added to the flames. The third time a Hussar tank crew managed to break through. A second barricade behind the first had to be crashed before the forest road was clear for the passage of infantry and artillery. Losses were naturally very heavy. During the retreat which followed there were countless bloody actions against road blocks, similar to that at Pegu.

Wingate carefully studied the road block and, as this book tells, not only mastered it, but turned the principle behind it against the Japanese. With the same assiduity and intelligence he applied himself to surpassing the enemy in every branch of jungle warfare. His success, and the experience he gained, are a reasonable guarantee that when the Allies launch a full-scale offensive in Burma we, and not the enemy, will have unsuspected tricks up our sleeve.

I should like to end with a warning. When you read the rather unbelievable story of *Wingate's Raiders* remember that, although on this occasion the Japanese were properly worsted, they can be counted upon to fight with skill, courage, and tenacity to retain their hold on Burma.

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I. "NOT PUKKA WAR"

IN May 1942, at the climax of the disastrous Burma campaign, a Douglas transport took off from an aerodrome somewhere in India on a strange mission. Its lone passenger was a thirty-nine-year-old brigadier, Orde Charles Wingate, recently promoted from the rank of major. The ex-major was already something of a legend in the British Army. As a man he was an eccentric, with the reforming zeal of an evangelist and the intellectual fervour of an Old Testament prophet. As a soldier he was a specialist in the unorthodox, with an unshakeable preference for unconventional methods and a touch of the bandit in his zest for violent action. At his best against heavy odds, he had acquired the guerilla's extreme faith in courage, bluff, and surprise. Burning desert and rugged and chaotic mountains were his favourite terrain. Night was the time of his greatest achievements.

Wingate's daring conception of strategy and tactics applied on the battlefield had so far produced brilliant results. He won the D.S.O. in 1938 for clearing Palestine of terrorists and had been decorated again for his incredible guerilla exploits in Ethiopia. Brass-hats, enraged by Wingate's novel ideas, predicted that this young puppy would come to a bad end. Men of the stamp of Field-Marshal Wavell saw in Wingate a streak of genius and the makings of a great leader. This flight over Burma was the beginning of a mission which would show decisively which of them was right.

Wingate's mission was nothing less than to size up at a glance the reasons for defeat, fathom the secrets of Japanese jungle warfare, and be ready to plan a campaign which would be the vanguard of reconquest of Burma. The instigator of this madcap enterprise was Field-Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell himself, then Commander-in-Chief of the British armies in the India-Burma theatre of war. While General Sir Harold Alexander was still fighting the bloody rearguard action that held the Japs up until the monsoon broke and stopped them short of India; Wavell was already laying plans to strike back.

Nine months later the strange young leader and a force of several thousand men—largely second-line troops—went off into the jungle of Northern Burma to fight an entirely new kind of war against the Japs.

In the Burma campaign of 1942, operating against conventional armies that moved and received supplies by road and railway, the Japanese won by the simple device of infiltration. Small parties would carry out a swift and unsuspected flanking movement through the jungle, bob up from nowhere behind the British, and destroy communications or erect a road block. Behind a barricade of teak logs fifty Japs with a mortar and a machine-gun again and again cut off the line of retreat of a whole brigade, leaving the British the choice of waiting to be encircled by the main enemy forces or charging up a narrow road head on into Japanese fire.

Wingate planned to lick the Japs and the jungle by a revolutionary system of training, transport, communication, and supply. He would train his men in jungle warfare under conditions as gruelling as anything they might encounter in the campaign, until every one of them was a hardened, cunning, self-reliant jungle fighter. Motorized transport in Burma had proved a catastrophic impediment; for transport he would revert to the pack animals of Alexander the Great—elephants, mules, and bullocks. He would divide his force into highly mobile, self-contained columns and infiltrate through the Japanese lines, devastating military installations and wrecking the enemy's whole system of communications in Northern Burma. The Japs had surprised the British by creeping up behind them by the jungle trails; he would go one better and force his way, wherever possible, through virgin jungle, ambushing the Japs as they marched along the beaten paths. His own communication lines would be invulnerable, because he would have none—not in the orthodox sense. All his supplies would be dropped from the air; wireless would provide his only contact with the outside world. With these tactics he was prepared to operate indefinitely against odds of more than ten to one deep in enemy-occupied territory.

The more conventional military leaders were aghast. It was suicide, they said. Wingate was a young upstart, a madman. Certainly it was not "pukka war" as they or anyone else knew it. But, with Wavell's backing, Wingate's raiders set out from Assam in the north-east corner of India early in February 1943. "We aren't guerillas," Wingate told war correspondents at a mountain camp in the shadowy teak forest of Assam. "I think we can best be described as a long-range penetration group."

He called his men "Chindits" after the Chirithy—the mythical beast, half lion, half griffin, statues of which stand guard over Burmese pyramids to ward off evil spirits. The Chindits

symbolized the unique co-operation between ground and air forces. After incredible adventures the Chindits, dead-beat but with their tails right up, came back over half a dozen mountain ranges to tell the story of Britain's first victory against the Japanese. It was a victory that augured well for the future. For it was won on the enemy's favourite terrain by the guts and resourcefulness of ordinary British, Indian, and Burmese troops, by the skill and imagination of a band of daredevil officers, and by the sheer genius of a new leader.

II. THE NEW LAWRENCE

THOUGH trained in the ordinary way as a gunner at Woolwich Military Academy, Orde Wingate was a throw-back to the adventurous days when commanders charged into battle at the head of their men. He carried on the tradition of the eccentric soldier-genius that the British Army seems to produce once every generation—Wolfe of Quebec, Clive of India, "Chinese" Gordon, Lawrence of Arabia. He was a "sword and Bible" general, with a love for the desert and the jungle and, in his mother's words, "a flair for strange races." A profound believer in prayer, a mystic, he was at the same time a hard-bitten professional soldier, who loved fighting for its own sake. "You can't help but follow him," said one of the Chindits, "when you see him charge through the elephant grass in that old pith helmet. Wingate is that rare combination, a dreamer and a man of action. He dreams a thing—and makes it come true."

The sword, the Bible, and the "flair for strange races" were all a part of Wingate's heritage. He was a remote relation of Lawrence of Arabia. A cousin of his, Sir Reginald Wingate, distinguished himself as Governor-General of the Sudan and High Commissioner for Egypt. His father, Colonel George Wingate, served thirty-two years in the Indian Army, and after retiring founded the Central Asian Mission for evangelization among the Pāthans. The Wingate dynasty is one of soldiers and ministers.

The Wingates have displayed, with remarkable consistency, certain strong family characteristics. "The typical Wingate," according to a member of one of the American branches, of which there are several, "is individualistic and unconforming, and takes the shortest route to an objective." A touch of eccentricity

o be part of their make-up. Nearly two centuries ago the Rev. Paine Wingate, another American Wingate, scandalized his parishioners by appearing in public carrying one of the first umbrellas seen in the state of New Hampshire, an action considered most unseemly for a minister of the Gospel.

The Wingates have a strong religious tradition. The Major-General's parents were Plymouth Brethren, an evangelistic sect which frowns on worldly pleasures and stresses the infallibility of the Bible. Orde Wingate received a strict Puritan upbringing, which left in him the habit of prayer and meditation and a great love for the Bible. On a campaign he often used passages from the Scriptures for code messages to his columns.

All his life faith meant a great deal to Wingate—faith in a Higher Providence, in his own destiny, and in the cause he was fighting for. He led Palestine Jews, Sudanese, Ethiopian tribesmen, Indians, Gurkhas, Burmese, Australians, New Zealanders, Scotsmen, Irishmen, and Englishmen, and never failed to impart to them his own faith in the cause. His personal magnetism penetrated barriers of language, colour, race, and creed. When the going was good he burned with a bright flame that fired all round him; in desperate situations he was sustained by a chilly ferocity that demanded, and obtained, the impossible of himself and the men under him.

Wingate had a pet theory that human beings can store up energy as a camel stores up water. In the field he could keep going for weeks on end with only a few hours of sleep; when the job was done he would spend days sleeping or in dreamy contemplation. He did not smoke and was a fanatic about physical fitness, with a reverential belief in the health-giving properties of raw onions, which he sometimes munched on the march. Another of his many idiosyncrasies was to massage his back with a rubber bar-bell before going to sleep. When he was making preparations for the Ethiopian campaign he once carried his alarm clock round in his hand all day to remind everyone concerned that preparations were ticking by.

At forty Wingate still had a heavy thatch of flax hair. He was of medium height and average build, with the lean face of an athlete, a tall, thin, high-boned nose, square mouth, intense blue and deep-set, piercing blue eyes that proclaimed his intensity. He was born at Northolt, a hillside village just outside London in 1895, and was educated in England. He went to Clarendon School,

famous public school, where he was considered "rather odd" and was left pretty much to himself. He was quiet and unobtrusive, but if baited flew into a white rage and, though small for his size, soundly thrashed anyone who tried to bully him. He studied boxing and was always looking for trials of strength that would toughen him up. As a schoolboy Wingate showed a singular lack of talent for the army. In the Officers' Training Corps he was bored by close-order drill and made a show on the parade ground which was barely passable. He used to sing with great gusto the Charterhouse version of a song, popular at the time (1918), which went:

We are the boys of the Charterhouse O.T.C.

We cannot fight, we cannot run,

What earthly good are we?

And when we get into Berlin

The Kaiser he will say:

"Hoch, Hoch, mein Gott,

What a jolly rotten lot

Are the Charterhouse O.T.C."

The Major-General's only comment about his school days was: "I was an impossible little bounder."

In 1921 he entered Woolwich Military Academy and threw himself seriously into the business of soldiering. He quickly came to the unusual conclusion that a really good soldier has to have a wide field of knowledge, and spent most of his spare time in reading. He was an indefatigable reader after that.

For a man whose profession was war his range of interests was bewildering. He was passionately fond of music, and for hours on end would lie on the floor listening to records of his favourite symphonies. When Toscanini was touring Palestine Wingate followed him round to all his concerts. His literary tastes extended from Shakespeare to comic strips, but he preferred serious reading. His favourite subjects were philosophy, strategy, and religious history. He knew by heart the army manuals of the Great Powers and the lives of great generals all the way back to the Pharaohs. "People to-day," he complained, "read for cheap sensation, not to learn or to be stimulated—a lamentable state of affairs to which modern writers pander." According to one of his friends, "Wingate has never read a book that was not worth while, and never forgets a line of what he reads." The Major-General was a fine horseman, and won many amateur races and prizes at jumping shows. In politics he was a left-wing Conservative and a keen admirer of Winston Churchill.

Wingate's beautiful wife, the former Lorna Elizabeth Moncrieff Paterson, shared her husband's interest in military affairs. After the Burma campaign one of Wingate's officers called on Mrs Wingate with news of her husband. While she was making tea he ran his eye over the well-lined bookcases and noticed many volumes of military history and strategy. "Just the kind of books I'd have expected to find in the Brigadier's library," the officer remarked to Mrs Wingate. "Oh, those don't belong to Orde," she said. "His books are stored away in the country. This is my library."

Wingate and his wife first met on board a Mediterranean liner; she was fifteen, he was thirty. Miss Moncrieff Paterson went to school, to prepare for Oxford to study for a degree in English literature. But, instead of going to college, she decided that the time had come to marry Wingate, and she did so at the age of seventeen.

Husband and wife had a passion for abstract discussion, and in peace-time loved to sit up with friends until three or four in the morning thrashing out some cosmic problem. Orde Wingate had a geometric mind that drove to a conclusion as a straight line takes the shortest distance between two points. He had decided views on every subject under the sun and an argumentative disposition. If he sensed that someone disagreed with him his eyes flashed a challenge. He was an exhausting man to argue with. Always firmly convinced that he was right—which he usually was—he pressed home his attack with the thrusts of a skilled duellist. He could be sarcastic, scornful, and downright rude. Few who exposed themselves to Wingate's stinging repartees were ever anxious to cross swords with him again. He never lost an argument in his life.

Wingate had the kind of inquiring mind that never stayed put; he always seemed to be contemplating some problem. It was no accident that he was a great admirer of the Socratic Dialogues. When Wingate was not fighting battles there was a touch of Socrates in the way he went round firing philosophical questions at people and answering them himself with an uncompromising logic that would not leave a problem until he had reached a solution that satisfied him.

Wingate had an immense fund of knowledge, which extended to the most improbable subjects; he talked like an encyclopedia. "He'll look at some everyday object," said one of his officers, "a door-knob, a vase of flowers, or something, and start talking about it as if he were composing an essay. Somehow he endows the most commonplace object with a romance you had never suspected

was there. He makes you feel you're *really seeing* the door-knob or the vase of flowers for the first time." In the officers' mess he would hold forth with equal facility on Yoga, the social habits of the hyena, the behaviour of flies when you trap them under a tumbler, and how to win the war. In Ethiopia he once amazed a group of junior officers with a discourse on the technique of hyena-hunting by pistol in the moonlight.

"The mind of the white man," Wingate said, "is dulled by the narrow troughs in which we live," and he always sought out broader horizons. When serving in Palestine he spent his leave in a Jewish settlement, and learned to speak, read, and write Hebrew fluently. In the Sudan he mastered several Arabic dialects. During the Ethiopian campaign he could be heard in his tent in the early morning singing to himself in Arabic. He was also given to chanting Arab songs when he was driving a car, which he did with magnificent recklessness.

The love of adventure ran deep in Wingate's blood. "At school," his mother recalls, "he was always looking for unusual escapades, and met them in an original way." As a lieutenant, ordered to proceed from England to the Sudan Defence Force, he crossed Europe via the Alps on a bicycle. Later he spent a long leave exploring the Libyan desert in search of Zenzura, the "Lost Oasis" mentioned in an ancient Arab ballad. To save money for this trip Wingate gave up smoking for a whole year. He discovered that he was much fitter without cigarettes, and never smoked afterwards.

Despite his upbringing Wingate was no ascetic. He was fond of good food and fine wines, and was, his officers say, "a good man to have on a party." He held, however, that the comforts of civilization have to be earned by periods of great hardship in order really to be enjoyed. Before a campaign he kept reminding his officers that the good commander must learn to banish or control every human weakness.

Wingate's personality was violent, compelling, intense. Every officer and man who served under him worshipped the Brigadier. Yet he was a stern and exacting leader and never played for popularity. He won respect and admiration by example and achievement. "I trained and fought with Wingate for nearly a year," an Irish major declared after the Burma campaign. "He seemed to do everything better than anyone else in the brigade."

There was nothing theatrical about Wingate's eccentricities, and no desire to show off in his rooted preference for the *spectacular*.

He had no liking for publicity. On the contrary, he had, somewhat illogically, a violent distaste for the sensationalism inherent in any account of his exploits and bizarre personality. Wingate was his own public. He did not seek applause. He simply wanted, like St George, a chance to go chasing after dragons.

He was dedicated to his ideals with a missionary zeal that was no respecter of rank or title; his indiscretion was prodigious. Time and again it jeopardized his whole career. When first he arrived in Palestine he marched to the authorities and lectured them on policy. This policy, he vouchsafed tartly, was not his idea but Jehovah's, and he referred them to the Old Testament. In Khartoum he would stride belligerently into the officers' mess and tell the assembled company how to run the war. He loved to enrage his more conventional colleagues by poking fun at their thinly disguised counterpart—"the military ape."

Wingate's fixity of purpose led to countless clashes with brass-hats and complacent officials, outraged by his forthright methods and ruthless assaults on red tape. They called him insolent, cocksure, and overbearing. He took these charges in his stride. After provoking the wrath of a group of higher officers with his unorthodox ideas, he once cheerily remarked to a friend: "You know, I'm not half so crazy as people think."

It was as a captain in Palestine in 1938 that Wingate first proved—under Wavell's eye—his brilliance as a guerilla leader. Bands of Axis-subsidized Arab marauders were repeatedly cutting the Haifa-Mosul oil pipe-line and terrorizing the local Jewish population. The conventional methods for dealing with a situation of this kind had failed miserably. Wingate pleaded for and was granted a free hand to restore order.

He organized and led night patrols, totalling only a few hundred men—half of them British, half of them Palestine Jews who knew every foot of the terrain—and outdid the Arabs at their own game: sniping, ambush, and guerilla warfare. He built up a ubiquitous Intelligence system, and always knew exactly when and where the Arabs would strike. Time and again he caught them creeping towards the pipe-line or ambushed them smuggling arms and ammunition through the barbed-wire frontier between Syria and Palestine.

Wingate soon became something of a legend in Palestine, and at dinner parties stories were current of how, single-handed, he had talked or trapped armed bands into surrender. He became know-

as "Lawrence of Judea." Later his exploits were to win him the titles "Lawrence of Ethiopia" and "Lawrence of Burma."

Wingate's unorthodox, spectacularly successful conception of warfare was a fantastic combination of the primitive and the modern. He himself was a natural-born guerilla leader—fearless, inexhaustible, always alive to the unexpected. "Nothing is so devastating," he believed, "as to pounce upon the enemy in the dark, smite him hip and thigh, and vanish silently into the night." Yet this fanatical exponent of the rapier-like commando thrust was also the man responsible for introducing to guerilla warfare a Wellsian blend of modern science. He built the Burma expedition round daring new uses of the plane and the wireless—"two weapons which," he held, "have never been fully exploited." He was an expert in scientific nutrition, and before a campaign would carefully weigh the respective food values of dates, powdered milk, and digestive (wholewheat) biscuits. A master of propaganda, he had a genius for winning co-operation from the natives of a country; in Ethiopia and Burma as well as in Palestine his Intelligence system was infallible. He always carried with him on a campaign a duplicating machine, a loud-speaker, and a unit of specially trained native propagandists.

Wingate was one of the few white men in this war who succeeded in swaying the primitive native mind. Ethiopia proved decisively the success of Wingate's formula for enlisting native support.

"I am convinced," he said,

that Lawrence's method of going in with a bag of gold is all wrong. Don't pay people to fight for you. Don't start by giving them rifles. They won't respect you. They'll say to themselves: "If they've got rifles, why don't they use them?" My method is to tell people: "We've come to fight a common enemy. We don't need you to fight our battles for us. But if you want to help, show us what you can do and we may give you arms." To raise a real fighting revolt, you must send in a *corps d'elite* to do exploits—not peddlers of cash and ammunition.

In 1936, when Mussolini achieved his conquest of Ethiopia with bombs and poison gas, Wingate was a junior officer in the Sudan. There and then he started to plan the liberation of Ethiopia, prophesying that this cause would some day be his own.

The outbreak of war found him, a major, in charge of an anti-aircraft unit in Kent. In September 1939 he predicted to friends: "We shall lose Poland. The Germans will probably invade Holland and Belgium. The Maginot Line will be outflanked, and we shall

lose France. We shall fight on alone." This prophecy had come true when Italy's entry into the war provided a broad scope for Wingate's talents. He was flown to Khartoum and entrusted with the staff work of the projected Ethiopian revolt. Things were going badly for the British when Wingate, now a lieutenant-colonel, arrived. But his appearance carried an unmistakable promise of "Veni, vidi, vici." "In the middle of our depression," one officer declared, "there entered Julius Cæsar."

Wingate's first decision was to make contact with Colonel (now Brigadier) Daniel Sandford, chief of the secret British Military Mission—"Mission 101"—operating in the heart of Ethiopia. Sandford, known to the Ethiopians as "Fiki Miriam" ("Love of Mary") was a man after Wingate's heart. He had trekked three hundred miles across the wilds of Western Ethiopia to the hiding-places of the Degachi—the guerilla chieftains—exchanging messages with them by tom-tom under the nose of the Italians. He was a canny, sixty-year-old Scot, who had spent a lifetime in Addis Ababa, where he had prospered by growing vegetables for the diplomats of the British Legation, and later had become purchasing agent for Haile Selassie. On November 20, Wingate joined up with Sandford after a hazardous flight in an old rat-trap of a plane and a suicidal landing on Sandford's home-made aerodrome. He told the chieftains that he would shortly lead in a mixed force from the Sudan under the standard of Haile Selassie. The Degachi renewed their pledge of loyalty to the Emperor. This was the beginning of the Ethiopian revolt.

Back in Khartoum Wingate summoned his officers to a staff conference. Standing on a giant map of Ethiopia, he pointed with the tip of a broom handle to the one gap in the Italian defence system—a trackless mountain escarpment. Wingate rejoiced over the hideous desolation of the terrain, which the Italians considered an impassable barrier. "In that kind of country," he said, "we can outfight anyone." When Wingate's pointer came to the Gojjam—the citadel of enemy resistance—he swept the broom across the map. "This," he announced, "is where we mop them up."

On January 20, 1941, Wingate crossed the Ethiopian frontier with Haile Selassie. He had an *idée fixe* about the restoration of the Emperor. This was the first war-time test of Britain's willingness to abide by her promises, and, as he saw it, his country's honour was deeply at stake. When Wingate was presented to the Negus, who speaks perfect English, he astonished the little man by solemnly

declaring in flowery Arabic that he was for him "to the last drop of blood."

The campaign was a typical Wingate affair from start to finish. Where it had taken his predecessors six months to collect eight hundred camels, Wingate rounded up fifteen hundred in a month. Then, with only eighteen hundred Sudanese and Ethiopian *askaris*, a sprinkling of British officers and N.C.O.'s, two trench mortars, a few field-guns, and virtually no air support, he stormed the first Italian strongholds in a series of swashbuckling nocturnal forays. Fired by Wingate's exploits, groups of fuzzy-haired Ethiopian irregulars armed with billhooks and shotguns—Wingate insisted they should be called "Patriots"—rallied to his side.

The going was so hard that nearly all of Wingate's camels died. A dozen times he himself escaped capture by a hair's breadth. Once he walked straight into an Italian patrol. "I ran like a hare," he recalled with relish. Like all veterans, he believed that if nothing is to be gained by dying, a soldier's duty is to stay alive. He scorned what he called the "humourless self-immolation of the Japanese."

Bluff played a big part in the campaign. Once, when his column was weak from hunger, Wingate dispatched two natives with a handful of Maria Theresa (Ethiopian) dollars to the nearest Italian outpost, and bought food from the enemy. His men ate their fill—then pounced on the Italians. Another time Wingate was standing in an Italian fort that had just been captured when the field telephone linking the fort with other Italian outposts started to ring. There happened to be in his party a man who spoke Italian like a native—Edmund Stevens, correspondent of *The Christian Science Monitor*. With a flash of inspiration Wingate said to Stevens: "Tell them that ten thousand British troops are closing in on them." "What shall we do? What shall we do?" wailed the voice from the other end of the wire, a strongly held Italian post fifty miles up the road. "There's only one thing to do," Stevens advised coolly. "Clear out *subito*." The Italians promptly evacuated an impregnable position on the strategic Blue Nile crossing.

The Gojjam campaign was a succession of smashing victories against fantastic odds. With eight hundred regulars and one thousand Patriots Wingate routed ten thousand Italians at Burye, south of Lake Tana. With four hundred regulars and three thousand Patriots he forced a garrison of fourteen thousand to evacuate Debra-Markos after a brief "siege." He chased the fleeing enemy as a hound goes after a fox upwind. At Agibar he caught up with

them on a plateau between three towering mesas jutting nine thousand feet into the blue African sky. Here, his tiny force half bluffed, half terrorized fourteen thousand Italians into surrender. After four days of savage skirmishing Wingate withdrew, informing the Italian commander that he was doomed and had better give in "to save your heroic troops." That night the Patriots made the hills for miles around echo with the wild beat of their drums. Next morning the Italians capitulated. Wingate had to refuse the Italian commander's request for a guard of honour; he had too few regulars for a proper guard and did not wish to humiliate a beaten enemy by disclosing the real size of his force.

Altogether Wingate's tiny army accounted for forty thousand Italians, killed or captured, and took sixty-five field-guns. On May 5, 1941, he entered Addis Ababa on a white charger by the side of Haile Selassie. To the very end he attributed his success to the Patriots and their Emperor; in token of this he made all prisoners parade before Haile Selassie.

Wingate had called his force of regulars—the real spearhead of the revolt—the "Gideon Force," after the Old Testament Gideon, whose story bears a striking resemblance to Wingate's exploits in Ethiopia. With three hundred men Gideon marched against the host of Midian, which "lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude." With the Lord's help Gideon routed the Midianites, and sent messengers throughout all Mount Ephraim calling on the people to come down against the Midianites and take the waters unto Jordan. "Then all the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together and took the waters unto Bethabarah and Jordan." The chapter about Gideon—Judges—was Wingate's favourite passage in the Scriptures, and one he never tired of quoting.

After the Ethiopian campaign was over Wingate collapsed and spent several weeks in hospital in Cairo on the "danger list."

Field-Marshal Wavell was so impressed by Wingate's brilliant leadership of the Ethiopian revolt that he summoned him to India in the spring of 1942, raised him to the rank of brigadier, and gave him a free hand to build up a new kind of army that would lay the groundwork for reconquest of Burma.

III. "WE HAVE TO IMITATE TARZAN"

THE first thing Wingate did on arriving in India was to send for books on the training and tactics of the enemy, the religion and customs of the Japanese and the Burmese, and the climate and topography of Burma, and for every available report on the engagements fought against the Japanese. In two months, thanks to an infallible memory, he had thoroughly mastered this material. Then, single-handed, he prepared his plan of campaign.

Wingate realized that every man assigned to the expedition must be "expendable." He was not surprised to learn that no crack regiments could be spared for the job. It was typical of him to accept and make the best of it. As he looked over the units allotted to him, his only comment was "I'll make any man who's fit a jungle fighter capable of coping with the best the Japanese have got." In July 1942 he assembled his men in the jungle region of India's Central Provinces for six months of rigorous training, the first part of it in the sweltering heat and torrential rain of the monsoon season.

Wingate's British troops consisted of a large draft from the King's Liverpool Regiment and odds and ends from a dozen other regiments. They were nearly all married men, aged twenty-eight to thirty-five, from the smoky industrial areas of northern England—war-time soldiers taken from a coastal defence unit at home and sent out to India to do garrison work. Most of them had expected to remain in that type of soldiering for the duration. They were born and bred to town and factory life, to the comfortable routine of a big plant and the bright lights and smooth pavements of Manchester and Liverpool; to cinemas and the steak-and-kidney pie of peace-time England or Lancashire hotpot and fish and chips from the shop on the corner; to a day's work at a factory bench and an evening game of darts capped by a pint of mild-and-bitter in the cheery atmosphere of the local pub. None of them had ever before been under fire.

A force of Burma Rifles was to be the eyes, ears, and mouthpiece of the expedition. All of them knew the country intimately and would act as contact men with the natives. Their officers would be responsible for Intelligence work and for propaganda through wireless loud-speakers and leaflets. The rest of Wingate's force consisted of Gurkhas, keen-eyed, wiry little hill fighters from the independent state of Nepal; units from the Royal Corps of Signals, plus doctors,

medical personnel, and veterinary surgeons for the pack animals from the Royal Army Medical Corps and the Indian Medical Service; a small group of R.A.F. flying officers to act as liaison with the aircraft; a sprinkling of Commando officers and N.C.O.'s who had taken part in the raids on Norway and the French coast, to perform demolitions, carry out reconnaissance, and conduct the most ticklish operations. With a few individual exceptions, none of the officers or men were volunteers. The British officers in the Burma Rifles spoke Burmese fluently. Some officers in the force spoke Gurkhali, and all of them knew a smattering of Hindustani, which was understood by most of the native troops. In the ranks the British communicated in sign language with the Gurkhas and Burmese.

The Burma Rifles—native Burmese troops commanded by both British and Burmese officers—were courageous, cheerful little fighters, for whom the British contingent acquired the greatest respect. Many of them had been educated at the American Baptist Mission, and bore such names as Washington, Nelson, Billy, and Robert. At night they would gather round the camp-fire and devoutly sing hymns. In jungle-craft they were unsurpassable.

Wingate had insisted on having R.A.F. flying officers attached to his force in order to ensure the maximum chance of success for his daring scheme of co-operation between ground and air forces. The dropping of supplies was, to be sure, nothing new. The Transport Squadron that was to supply the Chindits had the previous year dropped food, boots, and clothing to the refugees struggling through the mountains of Burma in the wake of defeat. In Russia and Yugoslavia guerilla forces had been supplied with food, arms, and ammunition from the air. But such droppings had been haphazard, hit-or-miss affairs. Never before had a force of several thousand men planned a long-range penetration of enemy territory relying solely on air-borne supplies.

Furthermore, Wingate expected that, operating in the thick of Japanese troop concentrations, he would be able to relay to the R.A.F. precise information as to what targets in Burma to bomb and when. The R.A.F. was to be his supply-line, and he in turn would serve as the eyes and ears of the R.A.F. On both counts—bombing and supply—Wingate felt it was essential that the messages sent to the air base in Assam should be drafted by a skilled pilot who knew how to pin-point objectives and what could be done with a particular type of plane under given weather conditions.

The area in which the Chindits were to be trained was thirty-five miles from the nearest small town. The Brigadier, with his officers and N.C.O.'s, arrived in advance of the main force. It was the suffocating period just before the monsoon season when the temperature sometimes reaches 120 degrees in the shade. Nerves were on edge and tempers near boiling-point as the Chindits waited for the dense storm clouds massed oppressively overhead to break and bring relief from the intolerable sultriness. Before the medical contingent arrived several men collapsed from heat exhaustion, which can quickly result in death if not properly treated. Wingate did the doctoring himself. He had no hospital and no ice packs, but he carried the victims to a dak bungalow—a travellers' rest-house—rigged up make-shift fans, and pulled all his patients through.

On the camping site was an ancient Indian well, a large rectangular affair situated beside the ruins of some Maharajah's hunting-lodge with a tall tower. The night he arrived Wingate went off to explore the tower and found himself staring into the eyes of a panther, ready to defend its lair. He bagged the male then and there, and a few days later shot the female. Thereafter the tower was known as "Wingate's Folly."

The Brigadier held his early training lectures at dusk, and the night would close in as he began speaking. He grouped his cadre of officers and N.C.O.'s on the tiers of steps round the well, and held forth to them under the stars with the old Hindu architecture of the Maharajah's hunting-lodge as a backcloth. As Wingate had sensed, it was a stirring setting. After the first talk, in which Wingate explained how he wanted the men to be trained when they arrived, his officers went back to their tents with the exhilarating feeling of being in on a great adventure. Church services too were held round the well throughout the training period. Wingate never failed to attend and liked his officers to show up.

The Brigadier put the cadre through an interminable course of "Tactical Exercises without Troops." The conventional way of carrying out "T.E.W.T." is on a table covered with sand modelled into miniature contours. Wingate scorned this as "unrealistic nonsense" and ordered sand-pits to be dug, four hundred square yards in size. Men were represented by the tip of a match sticking out of the ground, forests by tiny pieces of bamboo. The Brigadier insisted that every hill, tree, river, and gun emplacement should be built in exactly to scale—a hundred yards to a foot—and that every

movement be timed with stop-watch precision, so that an officer lying down in the sand-pit could clearly visualize the operation as a whole.

In one of his training lectures Wingate explained why he gave this painstaking attention to detail:

"Before a leader can discharge a task successfully, he must picture that task being discharged. Every operation must be seen as a whole. By that I mean it must be seen pictorially as a problem in time and space. The chief difference between a good and a bad leader is that a good leader has an accurate imagination. Most commanders are unable to foresee accurately. Their minds present them with a series of pictures showing their commands moving victoriously from point to point. These pictures are completely bogus.

"The good commander requires an anxious, meticulously accurate, and ever active imagination. By constantly insisting on scrupulous realism in the detail of his images, he will learn to picture only what he can perform and to reject all fancy."

In these sand-pit exercises Wingate covered every imaginable situation—column attacked in bivouac or on the march, dispersion, approach marches, ambushes, attack, use of mortars and machine-guns, co-operation with air forces, and so on. Before any exercise was started he "briefed" his officers as he would before a real engagement; Wingate, incidentally, was one of the very few brigadiers who personally briefed his N.C.O.'s. After each exercise he received full reports from umpires and platoon commanders. Then he lectured the cadre on the mistakes made and the lessons learned. The phenomenal thoroughness of this training paid high dividends in confidence and morale, and was largely responsible for the success of the expedition. In Burma Wingate's officers, often operating individually and at great distances from Brigade Headquarters, found that every situation they ran into had been rehearsed in the Brigadier's sand-pit exercises.

One of the incidental hazards of the sand-pit exercises was the Brigadier's mania for swatting flies. An officer stretched out on the ground pondering some intricate manœuvre would suddenly feel a wallop on the head and look round to see Wingate standing over him triumphantly brandishing his fly-swatter. With a Flit gun the Brigadier was as remorseless as a Stuka pilot over a road jammed with civilians. He was given to sudden fly-killing raids in the officers' mess and would spray Flit over the food, the assembled company,

and, on one memorable occasion, on the bald heads of two visiting generals.

Wingate set an exacting standard for his officers and N.C.O.'s, and was a hard commander to satisfy. During the training period he weeded out several officers on the ground that they were "good, but not good enough." In dismissing one captain who, in his opinion, was downright bad, he bluntly recommended that he never be given a rank higher than second lieutenant. "The only test of an officer," he used to say, "is in the field of battle. No officer should be allowed to hold a rank that he cannot carry in battle."

When the men arrived full-scale manœuvres began. "Jungle fighting," Wingate told the Chindits, "is a matter of quick, close encounters, where a man's life hangs on his cunning and speed and skill. Often the platoon commander is too far away to control action. Individual initiative is decisive. Man fights man."

Wingate's slogan for the force was "We have to imitate Tarzan." He taught his men how to find their way through tangled forests, how to march silently, how to cover up their tracks, how to recognize landmarks in the jungle. He trained them in infiltration tactics, river-crossing, column deployment, camouflage, patrol work, and marching in the dark. River-crossings were practised with full equipment on a river four hundred yards wide where rifle sections had to be posted on each bank and in boats to protect the men against crocodiles. Wingate explained to the Chindits the habits of wild animals and how to scare them away, and gradually broke down their fear of living in the jungle. So far as animals were concerned, the training area was as bad as Burma; in Burma, at least, there were few leeches and no crocodiles. When the men had become acclimatized Wingate led them on long forced marches with heavy packs, until they were the toughest of shock troops, capable of covering forty miles with full equipment in a day's march. On returning from Burma one private remarked: "The whole job was a piece of cake compared to the training."

At one point in the training period Wingate received a report that morale was low in one of the companies. This group was made up of the oldest men, whose closest contact with outdoors had been a gentle game of cricket on the common on Saturday afternoons. Their sergeant-major suggested to one of the officers that a brief pep talk by the Brigadier would accomplish wonders. It was a Saturday night. Wingate decided to address the men after church

service on Sunday morning. Next day, speaking without notes, he delivered an address that fired every man in the force. It was a speech, his officers say, that ranked with Winston Churchill's famous address after Dunkirk.

Just after training had started the monsoon broke with great crashes of thunder and mountainous black rain clouds. The choking atmosphere cleared, and the temperature dropped to 90 degrees. It was a grand moment. Officers and men stripped and ran out naked into the torrential downpour. For the next three months Wingate and the Chindits generally wore nothing but shorts. Training went on in heavy mud and under incessant rain. The jungle hissed and steamed, and the rivers began to rise.

In August a river in the training area rose thirty feet above its banks. Half the force was trapped and had to take to the tree-tops. The Brigadier's headquarters were situated on high ground some distance from the river. To make sure that everyone was safe Wingate swam across a mile of swirling water strewn with clumps of bamboo and small uprooted trees.

No one knew how long they would be marooned, and most of the officers grabbed a book or two. One major found himself with a Bible, the complete works of Shakespeare, and a volume that had just arrived by post and had not yet been unpacked. He settled back in the branches of a gigantic teak tree with water lapping a few feet below, tore off the wrapping, and turned to the title-page. It was Louis Bromfield's *The Rains Came*. The Chindits did, in fact, imitate Tarzan until the flood subsided.

At the beginning of October the weather turned dry and later pleasantly cool. The Chindits folded up their tents and went into open bivouac, with the cold ground as their lodging and a roof of stars overhead. In December Wingate carried out elaborate manœuvres, involving a two-hundred-mile march, whose results were to determine whether his men were in shape for the Burma venture. The manœuvres were completely successful. Wingate now sent an advance party to Assam to purchase oxen and collect special items of equipment. "Whatever happens," he said to Major Jefferies, the officer in charge, "don't let the grass grow under your feet." When Jefferies put in a large order for oxen he found that the Indian dealers had raised the price above the figure which the local purchasing officer was authorized to pay. At this point any delay in obtaining pack animals would have held up the whole expedition. Jefferies countersigned the purchase at the higher

price knowing that he could rely on Wingate to back him up if any questions were asked.

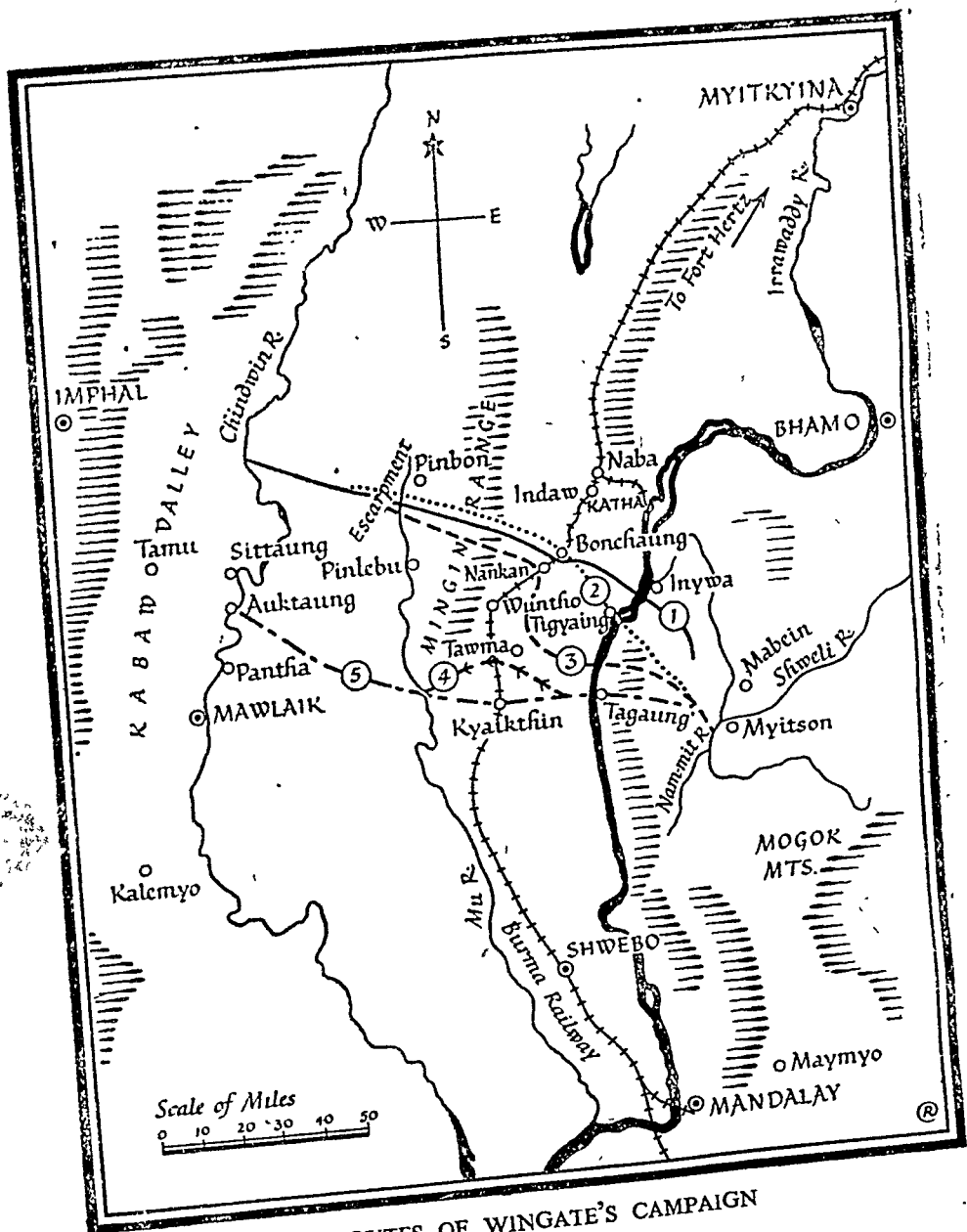
Just before Christmas Wingate's force moved to a large cantonment town to enjoy fourteen days of relaxation under canvas, and Wingate took his first drink since training had started. On Christmas morning the sergeants in the force shaved off their moustaches and put up a notice to the effect that all moustached officers would have to submit to a razor before being entertained at the sergeants' mess—a Christmas Day tradition in the British Army. One officer, Lieutenant John Long, a commando who had boxed for Oxford and rowed for his college, sported a large brown moustache of which he was excessively proud. He decided to fight for the honour of his whiskers and battled so furiously against heavy odds that he was spared the sergeants' razor. Next day, demonstrating to his section the correct way to handle gunpowder, Long blew himself up. When the smoke cleared there he stood, relatively unhurt but with no eyebrows—and no moustache.

On January 9 special trains carried the Chindits to a railhead in the mountains of Assam, leaving them a march of 130 miles over passes five thousand feet high to Imphal, close to the Burma frontier, the point of assembly for the expedition. By now the unlikely force dumped in the jungle of Central India six months before had taken shape. It represented the maturity of Wingate's belief that he could make a jungle fighter of any man that was fit. Every Chindit was trained to a fine edge. A tougher, more confident lot it would have been difficult to find anywhere.

IV. "TOKYO—3000 MILES EAST"

AT Imphal it was still touch and go whether or not the expedition would be called off. On February 5 Field-Marshal Wavell and other high-ranking officers, including Lieutenant-General Brehon Somervell, of the U.S. Army, arrived for a decisive conference with Wingate. An hour later Wingate strode into the officers' mess beaming; the expedition was on. Someone produced a jar of rum, and the Field-Marshal proposed a toast.

That evening the Brigadier summoned his officers and senior N.C.O.'s and outlined the general military situation. It was a critical moment. In the extreme northern tip of Burma the Japs



ROUTES OF WINGATE'S CAMPAIGN

were closing in on the Kachin Levies—a heroic little force of Burmese tribesmen under British officers, still clinging to a foothold round Sumprabum and Fort Hertz, the only aerodrome in Burma in Allied hands. In the east the Chinese were being pinned back on the Salween front. To the south, at Mandalay and Maymyo, the enemy was massing for a possible thrust at the Indian frontier.

One of the expedition's several objectives, Wingate announced evenly, was to spike these aggressive moves on the part of the Jap by claiming all of his attention in the coming months. By so doing they would also prevent the enemy from moving reserves to the Arakan front, on the west coast of Burma, where both sides were locked in fairly heavy fighting. The first and main target, Wingate continued, was the Japanese communications system; in Burma's mountain-jungle terrain every line of communication is a lifeline. Most of the existing communications—rail, road, and water—run in a north-south direction. The only lateral communications are footpaths, cart tracks, and dust roads usable only in the dry season. The backbone of the Japanese system was the key north-south railway which runs from Mandalay to Myitkyina.¹ The Japanese troops in Northern Burma were completely dependent on this railway for all of their supplies and reinforcements.

The Brigadier's plan was to lead the main body of his force towards the railway. This party would proceed with the greatest possible secrecy, evading the enemy as far as possible until the line had been blown up at a number of key points. A smaller force was to carry out a feint to the south, designed to give the northern group a clear passage. It would deliberately attract the enemy's attention, and give the impression that the main drive was directed at Pantha, Mawlaik, and Kalemmyo on the lower Chindwin. (See map at p. 20.)

"The success of the expedition," Wingate warned them, "depends entirely upon the co-operation of the Burmese. No effort must be spared to please and conciliate them. And remember—this whole venture is an experiment. If it works, it will save thousands of lives in future operations in Burma." He then reminded the Chindits of the tactics the Japanese would use against them. He brought them up to date on the Intelligence reports received for every mile of country into which they were moving, and ran over what had been learned from recently captured Japanese orders. In these orders was a reference to a certain Lieutenant Watanabe. Hereafter "Leftenant Wot-an-army" was to the Chindits a sort of Japanese

¹ Pronounced "Mich-in-auer."

Colonel Blimp. He and his underling "Private Tojo" provided a good deal of comic relief when it was badly needed.

Just before leaving Imphal on February 6 Wingate's force held a full-dress parade before Field-Marshal Wavell. There had been some late "Christmas rain," and the weather was fine with a watery-kind of fineness that reminded the men of England in the spring. The units were lined up in a grassy depression by a stream between two hills. Round them towered mountain peaks five thousand feet high. After inspecting each unit individually Wavell delivered a brief parting message: "This is a great adventure. It is not going to be an easy one. I wish you all the very best of luck." Then the Field-Marshal, as a gesture of respect, saluted the Chindits before they could salute him, an action probably unique in military history. It was an acknowledgment that this was one of the most dangerous ventures yet undertaken by the Allies. He knew—as every man knew by now—that there would be times when anyone who was sick, wounded, or fell out of line would have to be left behind; a swiftly moving force of this kind could not be burdened with casualties.

The Chindits marched for two days along a wide plain. Then the motor road from Imphal spiralled steeply into the Manipur mountains, twisting and turning so sharply that at one point Wingate, riding in the front on a black gelding named Rob Roy, could see eight sections of the road, each filled with a winding column of men and pack animals—a camera-man's dream. Sergeant Carey, a veteran of the 1942 retreat from Burma, struck up *There's a Long, Long Trail a-Winding* in a powerful bass, and the columns picked up the song, swinging into *Tipperary*, the *Beer Barrel Polka*, and an old Harry Lauder ballad, "Keep right on to the end of the road, keep right on round the bend."

The secret of the expedition had been so well guarded that none of the regular troops they passed knew who they were or what they were up to. An army captain, spotting one of Wingate's R.A.F. liaison officers striding along in a flight lieutenant's uniform with an infantry pack, revolver, Tommy gun, and large commando knife, yelled out: "What the devil do you think you are—Army, Air Force, or Commando?" and got the prompt reply: "I'm a Dutch submarine commander in disguise."

The third night as the sun set—first pink, orange, yellow, and green, then blue-black—the Chindits bivouacked in a mountain pass with a breath-taking view of the Imphal plain to the west,

deep valleys to the north and south, and the razor-backed Naga mountains on the eastward line of march to the river Chindwin.

Two more days' marching brought them to the Burma-Assam border, where a battered wooden signpost announced "West—6,000 miles to Blighty," and someone had added "Tokyo—3,000 miles East." "Some time before we'll see another signpost to Blighty," said the Brigade Major, and called a halt. At this point the force shed all its 'superfluous' kit—extra bedding, pots and pans, changes of clothing, etc. Here, too, the expedition's cash—silver rupees to buy food and hire boats in Burma—was handed out to the men. When the Brigade Major asked if anyone would like some more, no one came forward. Silver was not worth its weight to Wingate's men.

The expedition now split up into two parts in accordance with Wingate's plan to feint to the south with one body while the main force headed straight towards the railway-line. Wingate assembled the officers of the southern group in a clearing in the jungle by the side of the road, and here gave them their final orders. The next day the two prongs of the expedition parted company. As the rearguard of Wingate's party passed the border signpost someone shouted gaily: "Three thousand miles to Tokyo. Well, boys, we're taking the short cut home."

The northern force, under Wingate, headed due east. Down in a valley at the foot of the Naga mountains the motor road petered out into a little track that zigzagged steeply up the hillside. From here on down to the river Chindwin, the boundary line between British- and Jap-held territory, the columns marched by night for security.

Elephants—excellent substitutes for bulldozers and trucks—plodded on ahead, ridden by little Burmese mahouts. Each carried 800 pounds of heavy equipment, including collapsible rubber boats for the river-crossings. With ponderous daintiness the huge beasts picked their way along treacherous paths no wider than their own feet, clearing a passage through low branches and overhanging bamboos. They were followed by the men and the mules, one thousand of them, named after the Chindits' girl friends back home—Queenie, Daisy, Mabel. The mules had come to Wingate's force from Indian* artillery units, but some no doubt originally hailed from Kansas and Missouri, and one was called Yankee. Now they understood Urdu and Hindustani better than English and were more familiar with bamboo leaves than with corn and alfalfa. The big fellows carried the wireless sets, mortars, machine-

guns, and Bren guns; they were good for a 300-pound load. The smaller ones could manage about 160 pounds. Both the mules and the officers' charges had been laboriously taught not to neigh. In the rear were the slow-moving oxen and small grey bullocks, drawing carts loaded with spare rifles and ammunition, and all the weird paraphernalia of this exotic army. With every column trotted scouting dogs, trained to recognize the scent of the Japanese and also to carry messages from column to column through the jungle. Gurkha dog-handlers watched over them. Each column was a mile long. Strangely enough, unless there were leaves on the path, the columns could not be heard more than a few hundred yards away; the jungle has a curious way of deadening sound. Wingate issued his orders from a wireless set mounted on a mule, and at track junctions cut away the bark of a tree with his *kukri* and carved in a direction sign. When a halt was called a felled log served as the Brigadier's desk and headquarters.

Overhead jungle creepers trailing from tall teak trees partially obscured the light of the moon. Tiny orchids—pink, yellow, mottled purple, and pale green—grew in clusters on the trees. At night the jungle was still except for the droning of mosquitoes, which sounded like the faint hum of distant machinery. Occasionally the quiet was broken by a bird-call, or the wail of a baboon drifting up from the valley. Now and then bigger game could be heard stirring softly in the bamboo. It was eerie at first, and the men were on tiptoe.

Their line of advance led over wicked sawtooth peaks, with a gradient of one in two, and along paths no more than three feet wide, flanked in many places by sheer precipices, then down into valleys where the elephant grass grows taller than a man. Here and there rotting skeletons, gruesome milestones, marked the tracks along which refugees had fallen while struggling out of Burma the year before.

Marching along a valley a red-moustached captain, formerly a reporter on the *Daily Express*, started the "cliché game." Whoever hit on a cliché that fitted the scenery scored a point. The vegetation, for instance, was "lush," the swamps "mosquito-infested," the trees "dripped with exotic orchids," a "beady-eyed" crocodile "basked" on the muddy banks of a river. The jungle made all the clichés of an adventure story come true, and the game took the men's minds off the tedium of marching.

Now they were climbing again and had no breath for talking. Often the men had to scramble wildly to keep clear of the mules

behind them, clambering swiftly from foothold to foothold with the step of a gawky tight-rope walker. The path was so narrow, that the mule-loads kept bumping against the hillside or jutted perilously out over the steep slope. Occasionally a mule-leader cursed in a hoarse whisper as his charge slipped on the rocky track. Now and then a mule took a false step and fell, neighing frantically, into the valley below. Two or three men would pick their way down the precipice and lead the animal, unloaded, back into line. Sometimes they would find the mule badly injured, and a revolver-shot would ring out from the valley, echoing through the silent jungle. One of the wireless sets had a narrow shave. The mule carrying it missed his footing and went pitching and rolling into a deep ravine. Men slithered down after him and reappeared sweating and gasping as they pulled the terrified animal up the hillside. Ropes were lowered and the mule was hauled back on to the track, badly bruised but otherwise unhurt. By some miracle the wireless set was intact. The men who had built it and the foam-rubber mounting it was carried in had done a sound job.

In the middle of the night there was a high-pitched squeal as the ledge crumbled under one of the elephants, and he went crashing down the tree-spattered mountain-side. Mercifully a clump of bamboo broke his fall. His mahout and a British sergeant major patiently coaxed him back into line, still carrying his load. Considering the darkness and the narrowness of the tracks, these interruptions were few and far between.

As dawn broke swiftly over the jungle the columns bivouacked for the day. Unshaven officers sat down on boulders to breakfast off bully beef and biscuits. Tea for the Brigadier's party was made by a Madrassi cook, whom everyone called Fu Manchu. He had been through the last Burma campaign, and had pluckily volunteered to go back into the country as officers' mess cook. Wingate sat on a trunk sipping his tea out of a battered tin mug and picking peaches out of a tin with his fingers. He wore a tattered bush shirt, russet corduroy trousers, and an old-fashioned, scuttle-shaped sun-helmet. This helmet—a relic of the Ethiopian campaign—was a fetish with Wingate. He could not bear to take it off. "Without it," one of his officers remarked, "I really believe the Brigadier would go up in a puff of smoke."

All round the men squatted, eating breakfast. The Gurkhas, being Hindus, ate no beef and had to have special rations. With the Burmese, who were either Buddhists or Christians, there were no

food problems. British, Gurkhas, and Burmese conversed in sign language, which kept everyone in a high good humour. The British called the Gurkhas and Burmese "Johnny" or "Mr Johnston," and the native troops called the British "Tommy." An R.A.F. sergeant set his wireless set up on a knoll and tuned in to a London news bulletin relayed from New Delhi. The dignified voice of the B.B.C. floated softly into the jungle, mingling incongruously with Hindustani, Gurkhali, Burmese, and the accents of Yorkshire and Lancashire.

The animals meanwhile had been unloaded, led to a stream to drink, and tethered among the trees. This was a slow and weary business at the end of a long march, and loading them again took even longer. The muleteers—British and Indians—ate and slept beside their charges. "The men who handle my mules are highly important," Wingate told the war correspondents with the party. "Every one of them is a fighting man. It takes even higher courage to lead an animal into action than it does to lie down and fire. The D.C.M. might well mean 'Died Chasing Mules.'"

Mist began to rise from the jungle as the heat of the morning set in. The Chindits were now in the likely patrol-clash area and were taking full military precautions. Trip wires were strung out round the bivouac, sentries posted, and stand-to positions mapped for an alert.

The force so far had no name other than its operational cypher word. But the men called themselves "Wingate's Circus," "Wingate's Follies," or "Wingate's Mob." One column was commanded by a young major who had been an electrical engineer with the Liverpool Corporation in peace-time. His captain was an accountant from a Cheshire soap factory, and one of his lieutenants was a former shop assistant in a big Liverpool department store. In another column marched a bespectacled cypher lieutenant, William Edge, who eighteen months before had been studying history at Oxford, and the proudest corporal in the force was thirty-five-year-old Harry Day, in civilian life director of a large company at Muswell Hill, London. These men—war-time soldiers all—were typical of the British officers and N.C.O.'s in Wingate's Mob. Only some of the demolition experts were Commandos, and not all of them were professional soldiers.

The Chindits wore regular tropical uniforms and army boots, but were specially equipped with Australian-type slouch hats, anti-mosquito veils, machetes—razor-edged commando knives—and

rubber-soled hockey boots for scouting and silent marching. Their bedding was a waterproof ground sheet, 6 feet by 2½ feet, and a light cashmere wool blanket for each man. Every Chindit carried in his pack an aluminium mess-tin, a sterilizing outfit that would purify the foulest water, fifty rounds of ammunition, and six days' paratroop rations—a fifty-pound load all told. A day's ration consisted of twelve wholewheat biscuits, two ounces of nuts and raisins, two ounces of cheese, four ounces of dates, a small bar of chocolate, twenty cigarettes and two packets of matches, powdered milk, tea, sugar, salt, and Vitamin C tablets. At the best of times the Chindits were usually on two-thirds rations, and every one of them grew accustomed to a gnawing feeling at the pit of his stomach.

Salt—the cooling agent of the human body—was of life-and-death importance in Burma, where the men were sweating continuously. When a man's body is deficient in salt in the jungle the result is sudden collapse, high fever, and often death. At Wingate's orders daily "salt parades" were held to impress upon the Chindits the importance of using up their two spoonfuls. After they had seen a few cases of heat exhaustion they took their salt as seriously as the Burmese, who at every meal invariably set a dish of salt beside the food. They prefer it to money and value a handful at more than a day's wages. The Chindits soon discovered two simple ways of checking their salt intake. When they were getting enough their khaki shirts would dry with a white crust on the chest. The other test was to taste their own sweat.

V. OVER THE CHINDWIN

THE crossing of the deep, half-mile-wide Chindwin was the first critical lap in the advance. The east bank of the river was usually heavily patrolled. If the Japanese got wind of the Chindits' approach they could oppose the crossing in force and checkmate the whole expedition. Three days before the main body left Imphal Wingate had dispatched an advance party under Lieutenant-Colonel Wheeler, Commanding Officer of the Burma Rifles, to reconnoitre the crossing and establish a bridgehead on the east bank. Wheeler was a regular Army officer in his late forties. He had seen years of service in Burma, and spoke the language like a native. His home was in the hill country of the Shan States. Stoutish but

endurable as a tank, he had an even disposition that nothing could ruffle, and remained calm and collected in the tightest corner. The men—British, Indian, and Burmese—loved and respected him.

With Wheeler was Flight Lieutenant (now Squadron Leader) Robert Thompson, who was responsible for the advance party's communication with the R.A.F. At twenty-seven Thompson had already covered a good deal of ground in the Far East. After leaving Cambridge he had entered the British Colonial Service, and had been stationed at Ipoh, in Malaya, and in the Portuguese port of Macao, in China. He spoke Chinese and Malay fluently and had picked up a smattering of several native dialects. In 1939 he was called to Singapore to take up his reserve commission in the R.A.F. and was in Hong Kong on special assignment when it was stormed by the Japanese. He escaped capture, crept through the Japanese lines at night, and, as he put it, "just walked into China." Strolling casually in khaki through what he thought was an unoccupied Chinese village, he bumped into a three-man Japanese patrol. The Japanese were more amazed than he was—and not so quick. Thompson's knowledge of Chinese helped him to reach Kunming, and from there he was flown to India.

Wheeler's group included the only American in Wingate's Mob—Flight Lieutenant James Gibson, known as "Carolina." Tanned a reddish-brown, with blue eyes, fairish hair, and a deceptively debonair appearance, he was Hollywood's idea of how a fighter pilot should look. Actually he was a veteran flier. He had joined the R.C.A.F. at the outbreak of war, helped to knock the Luftwaffe out of the skies over Britain, and was transferred to India in time to discourage Japanese nuisance raiders from venturing near Calcutta. With a large bag of Zeros to his credit, he had volunteered for the Wingate expedition. "I'm sick of shooting down Jap planes," he explained. "I want to see the little devils' faces when they get it."

Third R.A.F. officer in the advance party was Flight Lieutenant Denny Sharp, a New Zealand Hurricane pilot, who had fought in Malaya, escaping through Sumatra, and later had taken a high toll of Japanese planes in the enemy's disastrous large-scale raid on Ceylon. He looked like a cross between a Commando and a hill-billy with his floppy hat, untrimmed black moustache, and four-day-old beard.

On February 10 Colonel Wheeler's group reached the end of the motor road, where a great dump of food had been laid out for

them—bully beef, vegetables, milk, bread, butter, and jam. This was their last real meal; from here on they were on paratroop rations and whatever the country could provide. That night they marched twenty miles up the Kabaw valley, which runs parallel to the Chindwin in a north-easterly direction. One mountain range stood between them and the Chindwin. To surprise the Japanese Wheeler decided to avoid the beaten track across the mountains, and on February 11 sent Captain Peter Buchanan with a section of Burma Rifles and two elephants to blaze a trail over the range which would carry them down to the river at an out-of-the-way spot.

Getting the whole party across the elephant trail proved a tremendously tough undertaking. The going was so steep and rough that in several places the men were forced to hack a path for the mules through matted teak and bamboo. Jungle creepers formed a dense canopy overhead, and only when the moon was up did any light filter through. The temperature rose to 90 degrees at noon, but at night it was bitterly cold, and the men's sweat froze to their skin. One hour's march from the Chindwin the party halted and bivouacked by a stream. On the morning of February 12 they crept down to the river to reconnoitre the crossing. On the bank was a small Burmese village, where the Chinese and Japanese had fought a rearguard action the year before.

A typical small village in Northern Burma is a collection of twenty to fifty wood or bamboo houses built on stilts, about six feet off the ground, so that they will keep dry during the heavy rains. All round grow clusters of fruit-trees—tamarind and mango shaded by giant ferns, and towering above them coconut-trees and toddy palms. Every village has its gold-pinnacled pagoda, with a brass Buddha seen dimly through the doorway, and, near by, *Chintheys* carved in brass to protect it.

On entering the village Wheeler's party found a *pongyi*—a yellow-robed Burmese priest—who readily gave them all the information they wanted. An enemy patrol had marched through three weeks before, but now no Japs were in the neighbourhood. There were boats on the river. He would send villagers to collect them.

Next day a full report was wirelessly back to Brigade Headquarters, and scouts were sent out to patrol the river-bank. By evening the Burmese villagers had assembled a flotilla of "dugouts"—long, narrow, very wobbly canoes, cut out of tree-trunks. The

Burmese use them for fishing and river trade. They are propelled by a single-blade paddle and carry three men apiece.

The crossing started at dusk under a full moon—the moon in Burma always seemed a bit larger than anywhere else; it was so bright that Wingate's men could read by it. The first boat-load over lit a small fire on the east bank to serve as a guiding light. There was no danger that this would give them away to the enemy. It was the dry season, and the Japanese were accustomed to seeing lone jungle fires started by the combustion resulting from two bamboos rubbing together.

The chief problem was getting the mules across. Mules are strong swimmers, but they just don't see any sense in swimming for a bank they can't see when there is a perfectly good bank behind them. They fought, as only a mule can fight, all efforts to coax them into crossing under their own power. Now and again a few more adventurous spirits were induced to strike out into the blue. They would forge ahead about a quarter of the way, then one of them would change his mind, and the whole crowd would turn round and swim like mad for home. In desperation Wheeler's men adopted the laborious expedient of leading each mule into the water singly, tying him to the back of a canoe, and dragging him across.

Every now and then an odd mule swam across alone, making for the fire on the east bank. The men on the far side would hear him puffing and blowing on the home stretch. Then he would land, shake himself, and scramble up the bank. Mule-leaders would slip up silently and grab him by the halter. At 4 A.M. the crossing was completed. The mules were tethered to trees, the equipment was carried to an open forming-up area, and patrols were sent out to reconnoitre the east bank up and down-stream. One of these patrols, on approaching a village, was enthusiastically welcomed by a limping man, waving what looked like a small pamphlet. It turned out to be a British Army paybook. The man was a former member of the Burma Rifles, who had been wounded in the 1942 campaign and left behind. Now he wanted a rifle, rations—and arrears of pay. He got a rifle and rations, but was told his pay would have to wait. On the strength of a year's experience behind the Japanese lines, he was promoted to the rank of havildar (sergeant). He later proved an invaluable guide and interpreter.

The next day at noon the main body of Wingate's northern force reached the top of a hill overlooking the Chindwin. Captain



WINGATE IN HIS FAVORITE POSTURE OF
STANDING

of



WINGATE (WITH POINTER) AND MAJOR BROMHEAD STUDYING A GIANT
MAP OF BURMA

Motilal Katju, official observer for the expedition, scribbled an entry into his diary:

Behind me there is a never-ending vista of hills, small and tall ones, heavy with their weight of virgin forests which have scarcely seen a few hundred human beings in their centuries of existence. Further back still are mountains which have left us a sore remembrance of blistered feet and aching backs. Four miles away I can just see the Chindwin glistening in the sunlight like a silver streak in a green bowl. Beyond, the forest-covered slopes of a hill come down almost to the river's edge. Behind that hill is the "green jungle hell" through which we must find a way, destroying the enemy. Considering the amount of marching under very difficult conditions already accomplished, the spirit of ordinary troops would not have been very high; they would have been completely "browed off." But in this force there is no sign of apathy or tiredness. The men are looking cheerfully to the beginning of the real campaign when we cross the Chindwin. The Burmese troops hope soon to be back in familiar surroundings and amongst their own people; they are only too anxious to go on. The Gurkhas, sturdy hill fighters who seem incapable of fatigue, are looking forward to the day when they will meet the Japs. Their compatriots earned a name for themselves during the retreat from Burma, and these troops, though they have never seen action, hope to do better. The British troops are probably the most cheerful of all. They look upon the whole show as a great adventure. Probably the greatest incentive to good morale is the absolute faith which every man has in the Commander. Practically none of us knows where we are going, for how long, or what is our specific job. Various people have talked of a journey of two months to fifteen months. Others speak of the force as a Suicide Column. But one and all say: "The Brigadier will pull us through."

Darkness was approaching as Wingate led his force down to the Chindwin, thirty miles north of Sittaung. A thunderstorm broke over the mountains and flashes of lightning illuminated the river. It was a formidable-looking obstacle—deep, muddy, with steep, slippery banks of soft sand in which a man's feet sank up to the ankles. Colonel Wheeler's party had already reported that the opposite bank for some miles was clear of Jap patrols; a small Japanese force, probably not more than a company, was believed to be stationed ten miles south-east of where the Brigade was crossing. The enemy had been taken completely by surprise.

One of the column commanders stopped at the edge of the jungle and whistled a bird call. It was faintly repeated in the distance, and the signal to advance was given. The troops filed quietly into the paddy field on the bank of the river, which under the moon

looked like a carpet of glass between the dark, forbidding mountains. Suddenly keen ears caught the hum of planes approaching from the east. Japanese reconnaissance planes? The men dropped flat in their tracks face downward in the paddy field or crouched low behind the sand-dunes near the river-bank. The mules, their ears pricked, halted and stood still.

The planes flashed a recognition signal. They were R.A.F. transports returning from dropping supplies to Wheeler's party across the river.

Now, from the far bank, a light winked and the crossing began. Anti-tank guns had been mounted by the jungle scrub in case a Japanese launch should appear on the river. The heavy equipment was ferried across in sampans, rubber boats, and dugouts. Friendly Burmese villagers, standing waist-deep in water, helped with the loading. Some of the officers and men stripped and swam across against the swift current. One major made the round trip five times that night. As daylight streaked the eastern sky scouts reported that no Japs were in sight, and the crossing continued. The sun rose that morning on a fantastic scene—naked men fighting madly with plunging mules; tiny boats, rocking precariously as shaven-headed little Gurkhas loaded them with precious cargoes of mortars, Bren guns, and rifles; R.A.F. men inflating their rubber dinghies; elephants, their mahouts still riding their huge necks, ploughing majestically through the water; long lines of mules tethered to trees waiting their turn to cross; and down the mountain-side stragglers who had lost their way in the dark hurrying so as not to be left behind. From a near-by village came the sound of a priest tolling the morning bell.

The success of the crossing was now assured and the tension snapped. "This is all very well," grumbled a bearded British sergeant as he slithered down the bank, "but it will be a long time before we get the football results again." A North Country major, his men safely across, lingered with the British war correspondents talking of happy days at the Hanover, a famous Liverpool pub. Then he too waded into the river. "If you get to the Hanover before me," he called back, "have a long drink of beer for me, will you?"

All through the day and far into the night the crossing continued. Wingate, without a moment's rest, rode up and down supervising every detail of the operation. Then he tossed his helmet into the last canoe, peeled off his clothes, and plunged into the swirling

yellow-brown water. A few minutes later the signal light on the east bank blinked for the last time and went out.

On the far side two Tommies sat watching the weird assortment of animals clambering up the banks of the Chindwin. "Looks like Noah's Ark," said one disgustedly. "Not 'arf," said the other. "We only need a couple of penguins to complete the ruddy zoo."

VI. "MANNA FROM HEAVEN"

TWO days before the main body of the northern force had started the river-crossing, Wingate had ordered Flight Lieutenant Thompson and Captain Peter Buchanan to push ahead and select a point eight to ten miles east of the Chindwin for a supply-dropping. Here all of the northern columns were to meet, collect their supplies, and then fan out over a wide front.

At dawn on February 14 Thompson sent out a preliminary wireless message to the air base in Assam—all communications with base was in "unbreakable" code—listing the supplies required: six days' paratroop rations for each man and grain for the mules. Then he and Buchanan set off into the jungle on horseback. At every village they stopped to collect information about the Japs. Buchanan, a former employee of a Burma trading company, spoke the language fluently. Jap patrols, they were told, had not been in the area for the past week or two.

The jungle track led into a grassy valley and they had a very pleasant gallop. It reminded them of Sunday morning rides in the hills of Kashmir, where they had convalesced together the year before. Thompson after his escape from Hong Kong, Buchanan from wounds received in the Burma campaign. Eventually they found a suitable place for the supply-dropping—a strip of marshy elephant grass with a clearing in the middle. They made for the nearest village to water their horses, and were invited by the Burmese to share a meal of rice wrapped in palm leaves, eggs, and green tea, which the *thugyi*, the headman, ceremoniously prepared for them himself.

When they got back to Colonel Wheeler's headquarters they found that Thompson's R.A.F. sergeant, George Morris—a bricklayer in civilian life—had mounted the wireless set on a teak

log, stringing the aerial to a treetop, and was already in contact with base. Thompson put through a message describing the exact location of the dropping-site. Then Wheeler's party loaded up its mules and pushed on eastward for further reconnaissance, while Thompson and a small unit marched to the area selected for the supply-dropping.

The planes came over the next night after dark. When Thompson caught the sound of their engines he fired off several green Verey light flares to guide the pilots. Patrols had made quite sure that there were no Japs in the area. During the afternoon Thompson's men had collected piles of dry tinder, and he lit five fires to enable the pilots to pin-point the dropping-site.

The supply-drop started at 7 P.M. and went on until three in the morning under a bright moon. Three DC-3's circled a dozen times over the clearing, releasing their loads down the flare paths. Then two planes flew back to base and returned later with a second cargo. These were the planes that the main body of Wingate's force had seen coming from the east just as the men were filing into the rice field on the west bank of the Chindwin.

Between 3 and 4 A.M. Thompson and seven men dragged the more conspicuous parachutes off the flare path into cover, then snatched two hours' sleep. At dawn they looked over the dropping-site. Several tons of supplies were scattered over the area, more than Thompson's small party could cope with, so they sent a couple of Burma Rifles to recruit the help of villagers.

The great loads of supplies catapulted from the skies caused a sensation among the Burmese, but they asked no questions and willingly helped the Chindits to assemble the containers. Asked what payment they wanted, they said they would like to have the parachutes. The trade in cloth, their headman explained, had been at a standstill since the Japanese occupation.

That morning an alarming message came in from Brigade Headquarters: "Take full precautions. Japs reported in village twenty miles south. Your column arriving any moment, will protect area." This was the first real alert in enemy territory. Thompson hid the wireless set, had the mules led into cover in the jungle, and sent out additional patrols. The threat never materialized. These false alarms, which occurred time and again during the campaign, were a great strain on the men. After the violent action and the excitement of a scrap, tension relaxed. But a false alarm created a tautness from which it took long to get unwound.

That night—February 16-17—there was a second supply-dropping. A heavy ground mist, fifty to a hundred feet high, made visibility extremely poor, and the parachutes were rather widely scattered. Again the villagers helped collect the supplies, and were rewarded with another consignment of parachutes. Today they are probably wearing nice white shirts made out of parachute cloth.

These first two experimental droppings proved that the technique worked out between Wingate and the R.A.F. was completely successful. It did not vary throughout the campaign, though with experience the air crews learned to drop their loads with increasing accuracy. The first move was up to the column commander, who would say to his R.A.F. officer: "I shall need supplies in three days. This is the route we are taking. Pick out a likely spot." The R.A.F. officer would then give base a forewarning signal with a complete list of the supplies to prepare. As soon as he had selected a site—usually twenty-four to seventy-two hours later—he would radio to base the exact time and place for the dropping, giving the latitude and longitude and describing any outstanding landmarks which would help guide the pilots.

Throughout the entire campaign the R.A.F. never missed a single dropping rendezvous. The peculiar topography of Northern Burma was a great help in locating objectives from the air. The main mountain ranges are shaped like the three fingers of an open hand pointing south, with the valleys of the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy in between. These rivers and their tributaries provided good natural features which stood out in the moonlight. They had, fortunately, been exceedingly well mapped, and Wingate's men were able to use every turn and bend as a signpost.

The R.A.F. officers had naturally expected that the Japs would frequently force the columns to change their route after a dropping-site had already been indicated to base, and they had agreed upon a code word to report cancellations. It was used only once throughout the expedition. On one occasion, however, two wireless operators, sent to replace casualties, were parachuted right into the middle of a battle. The column they were joining was attacked just as they made their jump, and they landed between the British and the Japs, who were firing at each other from the jungle at each end of the dropping-area. Fortunately they ran in the right direction. They were shot at all the way, but got through to their column unhurt.

Smoke fires in the daytime, light fires at night, guided the planes over the last few miles to the dropping-site. Most of the droppings were carried out at night because the chances of detection were much smaller. The light fires, built in the shape of a T or an I, could be seen by the planes as far as ten miles away, but on the ground the glow was visible for only one hundred or two hundred yards through the jungle. Smoke, on the other hand, hung for hours over the treetops and could easily be detected by enemy patrols.

When the planes were overhead, officers and pilots communicated by Aldis lamp—a lamp with a gunsight and trigger, which makes it possible to “aim” light signals in morse code. Each would give the other a preliminary recognition signal, and the pilot would flash an “F” when he had finished dropping his load.

The planes used were big DC-3's, which were rather lightly armed, and Hudson transport, stripped of their gun turrets to provide more cargo space. Towards the end of the campaign the Transport Squadron also used C-47's—improved DC-3's—which had just arrived from California. In the daytime Mohawks and Hurricanes provided fighter escort, as there was always danger of interception by Japanese fighters from the aerodromes of Northern Burma—Myitkyina, Indaw, and Shwebo—or from the main air bases round Mandalay and Lashio.

The dropping-sites varied from rice fields to dried-up river-beds and tracts of flattened elephant grass. In the daytime the Chindits would clear an area of about four hundred by fifty yards, and the planes would swoop as low as one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet. At night the target was a bit larger, usually six hundred by one hundred yards, but even in the dark the Hudsons and DC-3's came down to three hundred or four hundred feet.

The breakable equipment—food, weapons, ammunition, etc.—was carefully packed in canvas-covered wicker containers with parachutes clipped to the top and bags of straw tied to the bottom to act as shock absorbers. The packing was so good that of the hundreds of bottles of rum dropped to Wingate's men during the campaign only one broke. In the wicker containers were five-gallon kerosene tins, each holding ten days' hard rations for a man. Clothing and grain for the mules were dropped “free” in triple canvas sacks only two-thirds full; this allowed room for the load to shift without bursting the sack when it hit the ground.

The R.A.F. liaison officer with each column was in charge of operations on the ground, and had to stand on the flare path to

see that the fires were kept going. The tinder, being extremely dry, burned very quickly and the fires had to be stoked continuously. The fire crews would hear a sharp *phut* as each parachute opened above their heads, and could watch them floating down in the moonlight, about five or six at a time. They would land with a gentle clank as the container bumped the ground. The grain sacks came down exactly like bombs—*thump, thump, thump*, along the flare path—and the fire crews had to be pretty quick in dodging behind a tree. Flight Lieutenant Thompson had several nasty shaves when grain sacks hurtled straight into the branches of the tree he was standing under.

On night droppings the Chindits dragged the more conspicuous parachutes to cover, but did not attempt to collect all the loads until morning. By daylight a couple of hundred men could round up a whole consignment in about an hour. As a check a list of the supplies dropped was parachuted to the Chindits in the post canister. When putting in their requisitions the R.A.F. officers allowed for a 2 per cent loss, but they never lost even that much on any one supply-dropping.

In the course of the campaign the R.A.F. dropped, in addition to paratroop rations and grain, rubber boats and paddles; mortars, machine-guns and other weapons, grenades, gelignite, and millions of rounds of ammunition; wireless sets; petrol for the engines that charged the wireless batteries, and distilled water for the batteries; boots and clothing, shoe laces and safety-pins, haversacks, saddles, and hundreds of dobbins of rum. There was also a "personal service," which periodically dropped to individuals items they had stored with the supply officer before leaving, and which handled special requests as they arose. The R.A.F. made a valiant attempt to give the Chindits anything they asked for. Among the personal service items that travelled the aerial supply route were monocles, a kilt, false teeth, spectacles, pipe tobacco, boxes of snuff, small food luxuries, new books, notice to one man of an eleven-thousand-rupee legacy, and one officer's last will and testament. Every Chindit who had false teeth or wore glasses had left a plate impression or an oculists' prescription on file at the air base. At every dropping Wingate's men received post from home, newspapers, and magazines—the only things, other than food, they had to look forward to. Letters often reached them quicker in the heart of Burma than they had by railway at the training camp in Central India. The *Calcutta Statesman* and copies of *Victory*, the Army

magazine for British troops in India, sometimes arrived the day after publication, and one colonel regularly received his copy of *Punch*, which was then lovingly passed around from man to man.

Wingate's men soon came to have complete faith in the ability of the R.A.F. to keep them supplied from the air, wherever they might be. After the campaign one returning Chindit declared fervently: "The way them R.A.F. johnnies did it was a ruddy marvel. If we sent a message for supplies during the afternoon, they were over early next morning, and down comes the stuff we asked for like manna from 'eaven—right where we was standing, too. You 'ad to take cover to save getting your blooming 'ead knocked off."

The R.A.F. crews who supplied the Chindits called themselves "aerial coolies"; stevedoring the heavy loads from a rocking plane was hard work and risky too. The air squadron was made up mainly of United Kingdom personnel, with a sprinkling of Canadians and Australians. Wing Commander W. H. Burbury, of Sheffield, was in command. His number two was a Squadron Leader, also from Yorkshire, who had run a flying circus in England for some years after the last war. Both were veterans with more than ten thousand hours of flying experience between them. An Army man, Captain Peter Lord, was responsible for "laying on" the supplies. The organization at base was so good that 4500 pounds of supplies could be stowed on board a transport in one hour. On one occasion a column radioed to base an urgent request for four hundred pounds of chocolate—a rare luxury in India. The message was received at 5 P.M. It was immediately relayed to Calcutta, where the city's leading restaurant, Firpos, worked all night to make the chocolate. At dawn it was flown from Calcutta by special plane four hundred miles to the air base in Assam. By noon the chocolate had been parachuted to the hungry Chindits deep in the Burma jungle.

An official observer, who flew with the Transport Squadron on a daytime dropping, compared the job of the R.A.F. with "a game of aerial darts":

We were dragged out of our bamboo huts in what seemed to be the middle of the night, and were driven in a truck down a narrow road cut through the jungle to the air base. A giant transport stood silhouetted by the pale light of a chilly dawn. The crew consisted of an Australian pilot from Melbourne, a flight sergeant from New South Wales, and three English sergeants, from Grimsby, London, and West Hartlepool. The fuselage of the plane had been cleared of seats and the floor was packed tight



THE SIGNAL SECTION OF THE R.A.F. REPORTING PROGRESS ACROSS
THE CHINDWIN



THE RAIDERS CROSSING A SMALL RIVER



ON THE MARCH



OFFICERS DISCUSSING THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH WINGATE

with canvas-wrapped bundles. We were so heavily loaded I wondered if we would have trouble in taking off, but we made it all right.

We "stooged" over fighter base watching our escort take off to meet us. The mountains of Assam slipped behind. The Chindwin, flanked by sand flats, was a silver thread across the undulating carpet of grey-green jungle. Burma spread out to the east. We flew at a considerable height with dense cloudbanks fermenting below us. Ninety minutes after the take-off, the pilot dipped through the cloudbanks and dived quite low, watching for the landmark reported by the Chindits—a small valley between two flat topped mountains. He sighted it, and banked sharply towards a spiral of smoke rising from the jungle, then levelled for the dropping. The crew wrenched back the double doors in the rear of the fuselage, and began piling the bundles one on top of the other beside the opening. The target came into sight—a clearing cut on the top of a jungle-clad mountain. It looked about the size of a football pitch. On the ground black dots moved around the fires.

The co-pilot signalled to the boys in the back. A red light flashed. The men braced themselves. The light changed to green, and they heaved. Out toppled the bundles and parachutes opened in a jiffy. The aerial coolies watched the white blobs floating lazily to the ground.

The plane circled again and again until all of its loads had been dropped, then cruised slowly up the fire path to check results. The parachutes formed a neat polka-dot pattern on the clearing. The whole thing was very much like a game of aerial darts with a champion in play. Below, the Chindits waved their approval as we gathered height and turned for home.

VII. THE FEINT

AT the Burma-Assam border one section of Wingate's force, acting as a decoy group, struck south. It consisted of two columns, led by Major Arthur Emmett and Major George Dunlop, and a "deception group," under the command of Major John B. Jefferies. Its task was to divert the Japanese from the main body of the expedition and to deceive the enemy into believing that the British were driving in force towards the lower Chindwin. A day's march brought the southern force to its last food dump. Here the men ate their last field service rations—bully beef stew with bacon, potatoes, and onions, tinned fruit, tea, bread, butter, and jam. At this point Wingate paid them a surprise farewell visit in a "doodle bug"—a monster jeep—to wish them good luck.

Two days' march from the Chindwin they stopped for a supply-dropping and took a second on the following day, February 15, making no attempt at concealment, with the deliberate intention of drawing attention to themselves. They crossed the Chindwin without incident at Auktaung, forty miles due south of the main body under Wingate, on the nights of February 15 and 16. They were agreeably surprised at the pleasure shown by the villagers, who gladly provided boats and helped them with the loading. After the crossing they marched due south throughout the day, but that night their main body headed off to the east while Jefferies' deception group continued southward on a crucial assignment.

Even in Wingate's Circus, which contained a generous assortment of unusual people, Jefferies was a unique phenomenon—a professional Navy man in the uniform of a major in the Royal Irish Fusiliers. His home was in Wexford, in Southern Ireland. After graduating from Dartmouth Naval College he served nine years in the Royal Navy, and was approaching the rank of Lieutenant-Commander when he decided to resign his commission to go into business. He started a chain of American-style, super-service petrol stations in the south of England, and in a year had built up the biggest business in the Portsmouth-Southampton area. When war broke out Jefferies at once volunteered for service in the Navy. The Navy was already swamped with enlistments, and he was told it would be some time before he could be assigned to a ship. He marched to the nearest Army recruiting office and joined up as a private in the Royal Ulster Rifles. He served six months in the ranks, was commissioned as a second lieutenant, and applied for service in the paratroops. He was taken instead into the Commandos in August 1940, and saw action in the raids on the Lofoten Islands, off Norway. After several more Commando "jobs," he volunteered for "special duty" in the Far East, and found himself attached to Brigadier Wingate's raiding force as an expert in demolition.

Jefferies led his small deception group towards a village whose headman was known to have pro-Japanese sympathies and could be relied upon to relay information to the enemy. In the jungle, some distance from the village, he halted and pulled out of his pack a handful of military insignia. A little while later a red-tabbed general and his staff officers entered the village and commandeered the *thugyi's* house, politely informing the headman's family that there was no need for them to leave. Then, with carefully calculated indiscretion, Jefferies proceeded to give the impression that this

was the headquarters of a large expedition heading due south. He pored over maps, mentioning the names of villages to the south. He asked about tracks and food supplies in the south, and about Japanese troop concentrations in that area. He dictated orders to mythical battalions. All the while his officers, with an air of great importance, brought in a constant stream of messages, which Jefferies read with a suitably grave expression.

The acting was good, and the actors were thoroughly enjoying the play. One officer solemnly handed Jefferies a message which read: "You have been invited to dine with Lady Snodgrass, 8 P.M., February 25. Black tie. The old harpie has been told you're coming." Another brought in a chit which announced that he had drawn the favourite in the Irish Sweepstake. A third mysteriously produced an ancient cable from Jefferies' bank informing him that his account was slightly overdrawn. The latter caused the "General's" face to twitch so violently that the watchful Burmese must have imagined momentous doings were afoot. Regretfully Jefferies rang down the curtain with a message of thanks to the traitor's family. Then his party marched off with great dignity into the jungle, and next day caught up with the main body of the southern force, which had been moving east.

A forward party commanded by Captain Vivyan Weatherall had already drawn blood. Picking their way through the jungle, Weatherall's men ambushed a Japanese patrol about twenty strong, marching jauntily along a track. They were right on their toes and picked off seven Japs without suffering any casualties. The Japs, the Chindits were to discover, though individually good soldiers, were particularly slovenly about their reconnaissance. Time and again Wingate's men ambushed them sauntering through the jungle with their rifles slung over their shoulders as casually as though they were taking a walk in Tokyo.

From Burmese villagers the Chindits learned that the Japanese were in great strength in the area, which meant that the feint was succeeding in drawing the enemy's attention away from the northern force, responsible for destroying the most important section of the railway. However, survivors from the Jap patrol that had bumped into Weatherall's men must have reported that a British force was now heading east, and Jefferies, fearing that the deception plan might have been compromised, led a party off on a wide detour to the south to make false inquiries and plant false information about their movements.

After several days of marching and counter-marching Jefferies felt that the deception plan had been fully carried out, and set a course due east. He had previously arranged to catch up with the rest of the southern force for a supply-drop at a rendezvous roughly midway between the Chindwin and Kyaikthin,¹ the point selected for one of the two southern columns' attack on the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway. The second column, Major Dunlop's, was to cut the line roughly fifteen miles to the north. The deception plan, Intelligence reports disclosed later, was completely successful. The Japs duly massed troops in the lower Chindwin area, and wasted two weeks combing the countryside for a British army which, to their utter bewilderment, they could find nowhere.

"By the time we started heading for the rendezvous," Jefferies afterwards related,

we had exhausted our six days' supplies and were desperately in need of food. We couldn't ask for a supply-dropping, because we hadn't got a wireless set with us. Taking along an extra mule to carry the set, a wireless operator, batteries, and what not would have slowed us down too much. In any case, a supply-drop was really out of the question. It would have brought the Japs down on us, and might have wrecked the whole deception plan. I decided there was nothing for it but to stalk a village "X" I had picked out on the map. The captured enemy operational orders which the Brigadier had read to us at Imphal showed that the Japanese were in the habit of sending out whole garrisons to hunt for our men when we sent patrols over the Chindwin. I felt there was a good chance we might find "X" unguarded.

I took along with me Corporal Hayes and a couple of men armed with hand grenades. Corporal Hayes, a red-haired, freckle-faced young giant, was plagued with an outsize appetite—he'd polish off three days' rations between breakfast and supper and still grumble he was hungry—a particularly good man to have on a foraging expedition. Near the edge of the jungle not far from "X" we came upon a small river, and beyond it we spotted through the trees a ridge that looked like a Jap sentry post. We saw smoke rising and could just catch the sound of voices. I posted two of my men in a firing position, crossed the river higher up with Corporal Hayes, and started to stalk the sentry post. A ditch full of wet slime led up to the foot of the ridge, and we had to go forward very slowly. I think it must have taken us thirty minutes to advance thirty yards. When we were just under the ridge, I whispered to Hayes, "Get ready to rush them." Holding a grenade in one hand and a rifle in the other we shot out of the ditch with what we hoped were bloodcurdling cries. Sitting around a small fire,

¹ Pronounced "Chaik-sin."

placidly eating their supper, were five Burmese woodcutters. They gaped at us for a moment, then politely held out a dish of rice.

The woodcutters told us that the village was the headquarters of a Jap garrison of about fifty men, who at the moment were away hunting for us, just as I had hoped. Apparently they hadn't even left behind any pickets. I sent one of the Burmese into the village to buy food, and led my party back across the river in the jungle, just in case the natives had a trick up their sleeve. We were sitting by a clump of bamboo, from which we could watch the path down from the village, when a small dog trotted up and sniffed at our boots. Just then I heard what sounded like shouted orders in Japanese or Burmese. The voice came from the other side of the river, quite close to us. There didn't seem to be any way of escape. We couldn't move a foot through the undergrowth without being heard at that distance. It was one of the nastiest moments I can remember. My heart was beating like the drums of hell. Then we caught sight of the "enemy"—two Burmese peasants urging a herd of buffalo across the river.

Shortly after fourteen villagers arrived, carrying on their heads enormous baskets filled with curried fish, curried rice and vegetables, chickens, eggs, and bananas. It was the dinner they had been cooking for the Japanese garrison. I wonder what story they told the Japs when the garrison got back and found the larder had been cleaned out !

We collected the rest of the deception group, wolfed what we could on the spot, and loaded what was left on to the mules. After a square meal I was tempted to lay an ambush for the returning Japs, but the Burmese had given us information about a more worth-while target—a village some distance to the east in which the Japanese were working surface oil wells. We pushed on expecting to reach the village the next night, but ran into a stretch of really hellish jungle. We still didn't want the Japs to find out that we were heading east—they were looking for us to the south—so we kept clear of the beaten tracks, hacking our way through densely matted undergrowth. In parts the jungle was so thick and steep that we had to build a path for the mules, and sometimes we had to unload them and manhandle their loads. It took us three days to cover fifteen miles. The food we'd pinched from the enemy ran out excepting for the rice, which unfortunately had been cooked for the Japs and quickly turned sour. We kept going on a few handfuls a day of sour rice. Some of the men chewed on dry jungle roots. We weren't sure whether they were poisonous, but we were in no position to be fussy. Just before dusk on the third day of marching we came upon a small patch of bamboo forest on the top of a hill. We hadn't had a drop of water for nearly thirty-six hours, and spent the last hour of daylight frantically slitting open hollow bamboos to see if there was any liquid in them. They were dry as a

night it seemed incredible that in London, New York, or Delhi anyone could just stroll into a bar and drink as much beer as he wanted. I felt as if I'd been thirsty all my life.

The hillside dropped steeply into a narrow valley, and all the next morning we hunted for a way down for the mules. Eventually we manhandled the mule loads, and the animals slid down the hillside on their haunches. By this time we were desperate for water. An hour before dark we found a stream. The water was beautifully cool and clear; we drank like thirsty camels, then we bathed, watered the mules, and slept until dawn.

We were now two and a half days' march from the supply-dropping rendezvous, forty-eight hours behind schedule. By forced marching we covered the distance in a day and a half, and learned from villagers we had only just missed the rest of the force, which had taken a dropping that morning. We couldn't march another step and bivouacked for the night. The next morning we combed every foot of the dropping-site for any odds and ends that might have been left behind. We found about a dozen packages of dates. The next four days we lived on dates and sour rice, racing to catch up with Emmett's column which was heading for the railway at Kyaikthin. On March 2 we joined up with them at a point three miles from Kyaikthin station. That same night we were scheduled to blow up the line.

VIII. "DYNAMITE MIKE"

ON February 17 the whole of the northern force passed through the area where Thompson's party had taken a two-night supply-dropping. Here the columns collected their supplies, and pushed on eastward, fanning out over a wide front. The elephants and bullock carts had been left behind at the Chindwin, as they would have slowed down the movement of the Chindits. The bullocks joined the mules as pack animals, but their chief value was the fact that they were "walking beef." At the start of the campaign there had been some excitement with the mules because they were all in tip-top condition and rather skittish. Ten days of hard marching had already calmed them down.

The columns were self-contained units capable of operating at considerable distances from one another or of assembling quickly at one point for a big attack. Each column had its wireless set and R.A.F. officer, who was responsible for the supply-droppings, and a small group of demolition experts. Wingate's own column, to which was attached Lieutenant-Colonel Wheeler's Burma Rifles Headquarters, was the brains and guiding hand of the expedition.

It was an executive rather than a combatant unit and contained only a light protective force of fighting platoons. It was also the mouth-piece of the expedition, and was equipped with leaflets and loud-speakers for propaganda among the natives, the results of which became apparent later. Wingate planned and directed each step in the campaign and controlled the movements of the columns, issuing his orders by wireless and receiving frequent reports by wireless from his column commanders. Nothing quite like this had ever before been attempted in military history. Wingate was playing a gigantic chess game by remote control on a jungle-board of ten thousand square miles.

The expedition's first target, the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway, lay a hundred miles' marching distance¹ from the point at which the northern force had crossed from the Chindwin. The Brigadier's plan was to stab at the railway on a wide front, destroying military installations, supply dumps, highways, dust roads, and bridges as the columns advanced eastward across the grain of the country. East of the Chindwin the ground sloped gradually into a range of mountains ending in a steep escarpment that rose eight hundred feet then dropped sharply fifteen hundred feet into the Mu River valley. Between the valley and the railway lay more mountains, the Mingin range. A column commanded by Major George Bromhead would go ahead to clear the way through the first range of mountains and the escarpment, then engage Japanese patrols operating from Pinbon in the Mu valley. After the rest of the expedition had crossed the valley, Bromhead's force would remain behind to act as rearguard for the blowing up of the railway.

The main job of demolition, which involved destroying a key section of the railway and three steel bridges between the Jap bases of Indaw and Wuntho, was assigned to the column commanded by Major Michael Calvert, Royal Engineers. Ten miles to the north of Calvert, Major Bernard Fergusson's column was to dynamite the strategic Bonchaung Gorge bridge. Wingate's Brigade Headquarters, flanked by two columns led by Major Walter Scott and Major Kenneth Gilkes, followed some distance behind Fergusson. The two southern columns—Major George Dunlop's and Major

¹ The reader should bear in mind that *marching distances* in Northern Burma's mountain-jungle terrain are vastly different from distances measured on the map as the crow flies. Furthermore, Wingate's raiders seldom, if ever, were able to take the shortest course between two points. Thus, when one column is said to be, say, forty miles *due south* of another, the actual marching distance between the two is probably eighty to a hundred miles.

Arthur Emmett's—which together with Jefferies' party had carried out the feint across the Chindwin, were to cut the line at and above Kyaikthin, roughly forty miles to the south of Brigade Headquarters. In this formation Wingate's raiders swept across Burma towards the spinal cord of the Jap communications system. (See map at p. 20¹)

Major Michael Calvert, known to his fellow-officers as "Mad Mike," was a regular army man, a sapper. A former boxing and swimming champion, he was short, stocky, powerfully built, with a tousled mop of brown hair, twinkling eyes, and a snub nose set in a round, boyish face. Some called him "Dynamite Mike," for he was a professional wrecker, an artist whose eyes took on a holy look as he told of dynamiting bridges. Trekking across Burma he nursed his explosives with the loving care of a connoisseur decanting a bottle of vintage port.

Most of Calvert's war-time career had been spent behind the enemy lines. He was one of the last men out of Norway. In Malaya and then in Burma he stayed behind to carry out rearguard demolitions with the Japs right on top of him. He was also a booby trap expert, and left a trail of mines wherever he went. Time and again his column heard "Mad Mike's" traps exploding as Japanese patrols blundered into them, and Calvert would mutter happily: "Blew the vermin sky high, that one did."

Calvert was an ardent disciple and a close friend of the Brigadier. He himself was a fine leader with a keen brain, a lively imagination, and an infectious zest for battle. His mind was completely given over to the war. One day he confided to Thompson, who was R.A.F. officer for his column: "When I get to the top of a hill, Bob, I just don't seem to notice the view. All I can think of is: 'Calvert, there are two bridges down there.'" He had enormous staying power and did the most dangerous reconnaissance work himself. He was a crack reconnaissance man, and would crawl to within a few yards of the enemy. His courage became something of a legend even in Wingate's Mob, where courage was rather taken for granted.

Calvert's Burma Rifles were commanded by a Welshman, Captain "Taffy" Griffiths, who in peace-time had worked for a big teak firm in Burma, and had fought with the Burma Rifles in the 1942 campaign. Griffiths was the first officer in the Brigade to draw

¹ The lines on this map give only a rough indication of the routes followed by Wingate's columns, and are designed solely to assist the reader in following the narrative. It would be impossible to show on a map of this size the countless detours made by each of the columns.

blood. In January he had set the ball rolling by leading a small scouting patrol across the Chindwin, and had shot three Japs. His hair was long and shaggy, and he sported a huge moustache; by the time he had grown a beard he was a terrifying spectacle.

The wildest-looking member of Wingate's Follies was Lieutenant Geoffrey Lockett, a former Liverpool wine merchant, referred to among the Chindits as "the toothless, kilted wonder." Before starting out Lockett had all his front teeth pulled out, grew an enormous beard, and—being a good Scotsman—insisted on fighting the campaign in a kilt. As a concession to local fashion he wore a cone-shaped Burmese coolie hat. In a tight corner he would pull a battered tin box out of his pocket and take a large pinch of snuff.

Lockett's kilt, as a matter of fact, came in very handy. Calvert burrowed under it to shade his torch when reading maps at night, and other officers used it as a wind-shield to light matches under—until Lockett was burned in a tender spot and announced that hereafter match-lighting under his skirt was *verboten*.

In New Delhi Lockett's appearance caused rage and consternation among the retired military and their memsahibs. Thompson heard one woman exclaim as he and Lockett entered the bar of Maiden's Hotel: "Who on earth is that extraordinary man? Sometimes he has teeth, sometimes he hasn't, and he's always taking snuff. I don't object to that so much, but he drops it all over his moustache. Too disgusting!" To which a vintage brass-hat added with a snort: "What a very odd type of young man seems to get commissioned these days."

During the training period Lockett formed the Tonga Club; the *tonga* is a native carriage well patronized by retired generals short of wind and afflicted with gout. The members of the Tonga Club met to discuss what they would do when they were retired generals. They agreed, among other things, to hold bath-chair races and to see to it that commissions went *only* to "a very odd type of young man." One of the alumni of the club later confessed: "We longed for civilization so much that we had to thumb our noses at it."

Behind Lockett's freakish antics and eccentric façade was a determined soldier and a brilliant officer. He had risen from the ranks, had been commissioned in the Seaforth Highlanders, and then had served with the 4th Commandos. For his exploits in the Wingate expedition he was awarded the Military Cross. "Throughout the operations," his citation read,

Lieutenant Lockett commanded a squad which achieved the greatest results of all the squads in the Brigade, largely because of the personal courage and initiative of this officer and of his men, inspired by his example.

Calvert's company sergeant-major was Robert Blain, of Loch Lomond, a tower of strength to the Chindits in more ways than one. This lanky, thirty-year-old Scotsman had fought in the Battle of Flanders, and on the beaches of Dunkirk he had potted Stukas with a rifle. Later, as a Commando, he had taken part in raids on the coast of France and the islands off Norway. He had an uncanny ear for the tread of Japanese patrols, and dodged behind a tree, Tommy-gun blazing, as fast as he could down a glass of gin. His fire was murderously accurate, and he had a low opinion of Jap marksmanship. "We started off this war underrating the Japs," he declared after the campaign,

and now we are overrating them. In my view they are the worst shots I ever saw. We were being attacked one day and I popped my head up to have a look. There were two Japs ten yards away. They opened fire on me with Tommy-guns. All their bullets hit the ground at least five yards in front of me. It was the most terrible display of shooting I ever saw. If any of my chaps shot like that I would put them under arrest.

Blain was a philosopher and a wit. When the situation looked blackest he would joke: "As my old grandmother says, these things are sent to try us." The hardest part of the campaign, he said, was not being able to sing. Blain was afflicted with a slight stammer, and by way of compensation nature had endowed him with a resonant parade-ground bass. On the journey out to India he had sung in the ship's choir, and after the campaign, in the grounds of the hospital at Imphal, he serenaded the nurses with his favourite piece, Schubert's *Ave Maria*.

Before Calvert's column started out from the supply-dropping area ten miles east of the Chindwin, "Mad Mike" announced to his officers: "*Nunquam Wapas*" will be our motto." (*Nunquam* is Latin for "never," *Wapas* is Hindustani for "retreat.") "It is an admirable phrase," he added, "which proves both the classical education of the British officer and his ability to pick up native dialects."

On February 17 the column made a long night march and bivouacked in the middle of flat teak-jungle. Next day there was some late Christmas rain, which left the men soaking wet and in rather low spirits. When a Burma Rifles scout reported that a Japanese patrol, about forty strong, was in the valley in front of

them Calvert decided this would be a good time to draw blood. Leaving Flight-Lieutenant Thompson and a small protective force to guard the mules and heavy equipment, he struck off into the jungle to ambush the Japs.

Thompson had orders to push off at 8 P.M. that night, and rejoin Calvert at a prearranged rendezvous. He sent out two patrols to make sure that his force was not surprised, and settled down to wait. By dusk one of the patrols had failed to return, and Thompson knew it must be lost. He was faced with a ticklish decision. The Chindits' only security lay in speed of movement; if he waited until morning they might be trapped. To abandon the patrol seemed unnecessarily harsh. He realized how easy it was to get lost in the jungle; the patrol might be only a few hundred yards away and yet be unable to locate the bivouac. He decided to give them an hour or two of daylight to find their way back. The next morning, just as he was moving off, the patrol turned up. They had slept less than five hundred yards from Thompson's bivouac.

Thompson joined Calvert at the rendezvous at 2 P.M. and learned that he had failed to contact the Japs, who had moved off to the south. At this point they picked up wireless orders from Wingate saying, "Fear you are on wild goose chase," and ordering them to push forward as fast as possible to a rendezvous on the west side of the escarpment. The Brigadier had sent out an advance party under Lieutenant-Colonel Wheeler to select the best point to cross the escarpment. Calvert's men had tea and paratroop rations and set off at five, marching through the night until just before dawn. Another night's forced marching brought them to within a few miles of the rendezvous. Here the column bivouacked while Calvert, Thompson, and an orderly set out on horseback to find Colonel Wheeler's party. They soon picked up the tracks of a Japanese patrol of about sixty men. The Chindits were always able to recognize the footprints of the Japanese by the small size of the boot, the rounded heel, and the quite distinctive pattern in which the studs were hammered in. Even when a path was covered with leaves they could, by clearing a small patch, tell whether it had been used by the Japs and by how many men.

At the next village Calvert learned that enemy patrols had been very active in the neighbourhood. "What'll you do if we bump into the Japs?" he asked Thompson. "Dig my heels in and go straight through them," said Thompson. "I reckon it's the best chance of being missed." They didn't, however, . . . and Japs.

but were picked up by one of Wheeler's sentries and were taken along to the Colonel, who offered them a welcome cup of tea.

From Wheeler they learned that a Japanese force, reported to be three hundred strong, was camped fifteen miles to the south. This gave Calvert and Thompson a nasty shock, since they had left their column in bivouac eight miles to the south, and therefore only seven miles from the enemy. The villages all around, Wheeler added, were filled with Jap patrols. One of his Burma Rifles, entering a village in civilian clothes, had been recognized, shot at, and wounded. At this point the Brigadier arrived.

Wingate already seemed to be taking on the characteristics of the wild beasts that prowled the jungle. He marched with his head sunk forward like a panther's and the tense stoop of a hyena in his shoulders. His eyes had a wolfish glint. His beard was shaggy as a lion's mane. He was, incidentally, inordinately proud of his beard. Every day he combed it carefully in front of a broken, three-cornered piece of glass perched on a teak log or in a clump of bamboo. Throughout the campaign this "mirror" was one of his most treasured possessions.

When Wheeler told Wingate that half a battalion of Japs was camped to the south the Brigadier at once decided to attack with troops picked from each of the northern columns. The remainder of the force was to move up a few miles to another rendezvous area and take a large supply-dropping.

The attack on the Japs turned out to be another wild goose chase. The enemy had packed up and moved off eastward, leaving behind an elephant with a Burmese mahout. One of Calvert's men captured the elephant and immediately christened her "Flossie." By right of seizure Flossie went to Calvert's column. The Burmese mahout was perfectly willing to change sides and work for the British.

On February 24 and 25 the northern force took a two-day supply-dropping on a huge paddy field near Tonmakeng. The planes came over by daylight at frequent intervals with a big fighter escort. As yet there was little need for equipment renewal, and the supplies dropped consisted of paratroop rations, grain for the mules, home mail and newspapers, boot-laces, and petrol for the engines that charged the wireless batteries. The Chindits also got twenty jars of rum. Sipping the first rum ration received from the skies, a delighted cockney private exclaimed: "Blimey, it was wonderful. Just like Father Christmas."

The success of this mammoth supply-drop in the heart of enemy territory had a magical effect on the men's morale. The Gurkhas and Burmese especially were conditioned to the idea of trucks rolling up a motor road with supplies, and had been a bit worried at the idea of launching into the blue without communication lines.

At the supply-dropping rendezvous Wingate mapped routes through the escarpment and the columns spread out again. For a whole day Calvert's column marched up a sandy-bottomed *chaung* (small river) with water over their shins. *Chaung*-marching is the nearest approach to purgatory that can conveniently be devised for man or beast. The men kept bruising their ankles against boulders, and there were nasty stretches of rock where they had to unload the mules and manhandle the heavy equipment. Several men slipped into deep holes in the bed of the *chaung*, sinking up to the armpits, and the column had to halt while they were pulled out of the soft sand.

After two days' marching from the rendezvous Calvert's column reached the top of the escarpment and bivouacked there with the Mu valley at its feet. At dawn next day they went down into the valley and learned from villagers that there was a Jap patrol a mile and a half away. Calvert was tempted to go after it but was afraid of upsetting the time-table for blowing up the railway. There was still a tall range of mountains to cross.

The Chindits marched all out for several days, climbing two thousand feet through luxuriant jungle where little pink and purple orchids grew on the trees. It was imperative to leave no tracks to the railway, so they advanced along fast-flowing *chaungs*, marching up to their waists in water. At this height the water in the *chaungs* was cool and crystal clear, and when the Chindits halted in the evening there was time to strip and go for a swim in big pools fifteen feet deep.

Picking their way down the mountainside, they met villagers coming up from the railway line. From all reports it looked like a clear run. The Burmese also gave them the exact position of the Japanese barracks at Naba, Indaw, and Wuntho. When the column halted Thompson relayed this information to the Brigadier, whose group was some distance behind them and slightly to the north. Wingate radioed back: "Get Thompson to arrange bombing. Attack railway."

Calvert at once sent a section of Burma Rifles to reconnoitre the station, Nankan, and the neighbouring village. They reported that

no Japs were in the area, but early that morning several truck-loads of troops had driven past Nankan on a dust road which the enemy had just built between Indaw and Wuntho. Calvert had not bargained for the motor road.

IX. BLOWING THE RAILWAY

THE Chindits came out on to the line without sighting a Jap. Nankan station was completely deserted. All round were scattered great teak logs and debris from the 1942 retreat—magazine pouches, tin cans, smashed equipment, and a rusty, crippled jeep. On a siding stood trucks riddled with bullet-holes, and a blown-up locomotive rested grotesquely on its side. The station was situated in a small area of completely open ground. Two hundred yards north of it, surrounded by jungle palms, was a Burmese village. The Japs were based in some strength at Indaw, twenty-five miles to the north, and at Wuntho, ten miles south (see sketch map at p. 54). The new motor road from Indaw to Wuntho cut across the railway line just beside the station. Calvert fixed a rendezvous several miles south-east of the railway, then disposed his force as follows:

The demolition crews—No. 1 party under Calvert himself and No. 2 party under Captain George Silcock—moved on to the railway at 12.45 P.M., three miles on either side of the station, and started working their way in, laying charges as they went. No. 3 party, the weakest, which consisted of the mule leaders, the mules, and Flossie the elephant, marched through the station into cover by a *chaung* in the jungle on the south-east side of the line. No. 4, armed with a Bren-gun and an anti-tank rifle, took up a position half a mile to the north to watch the motor road from Indaw. No. 5 under Captain Mackenzie was stationed on both sides of the motor road where it crossed the *chaung* two miles due south of the station; it was equipped with a Bren-gun, anti-tank rifle, and mines to hold off a Japanese attack from Wuntho. No. 6, the keep-in-touch party, was made up of Captain Taffy Griffiths with a section of Burma Rifles and Flight-Lieutenant Thompson with the wireless sets.

The villagers came out to have a look at the Chindits, and started chatting with the Burma Rifles about recent train movements and

conditions in the neighbourhood. Everything was extraordinarily peaceful. Thompson started encoding a message to base calling on the R.A.F. to bomb targets at Naba, Indaw, and Wuntho. He looked at his watch: it was exactly 1.14. At 1.15 the battle of Nankan was under way.

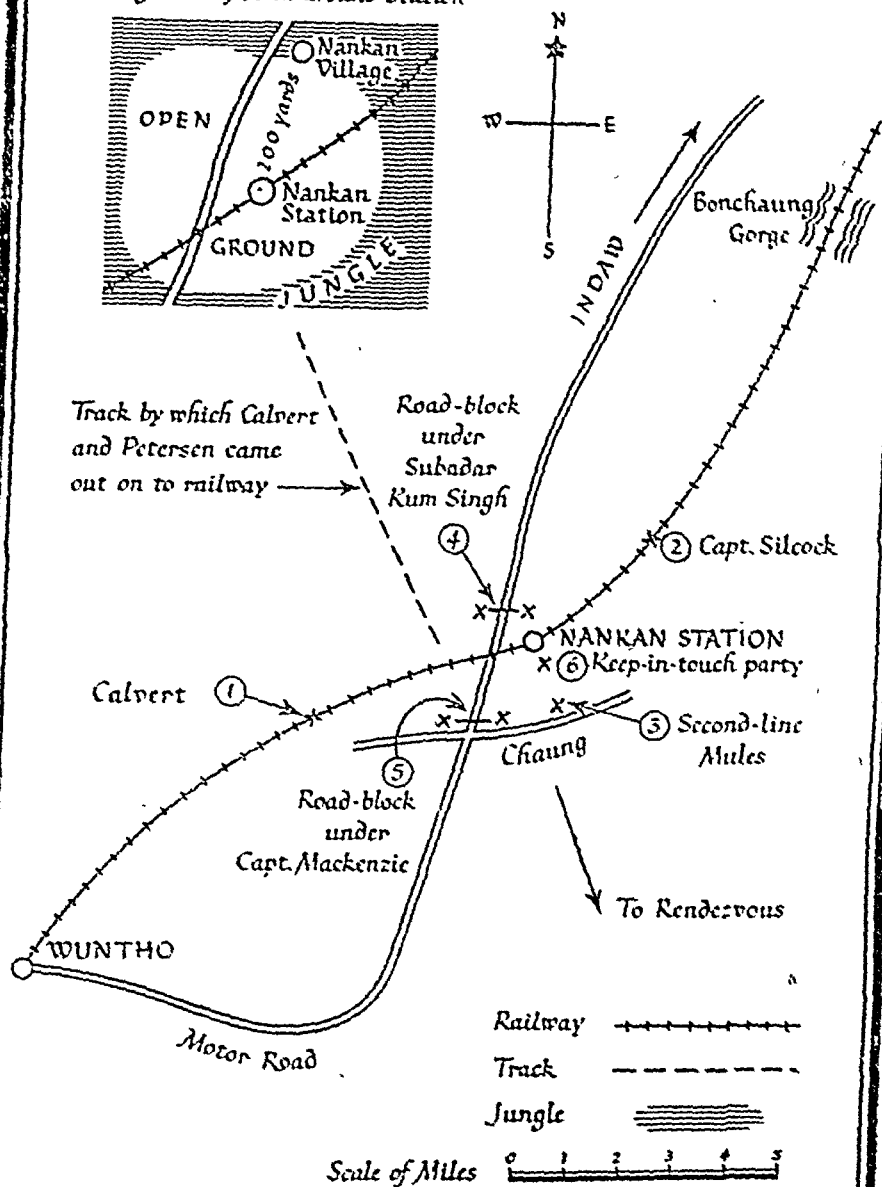
Subadar (Warrant Officer) Kum Singh Gurung, the Gurkha officer in command of No. 4 party detailed to watch the motor road to the north, had posted his men on the edge of the jungle on either side of the road. Two truckloads of Japanese troops came lumbering down from Indaw head on into Subadar Kum Singh's ambush. The first burst of fire from his anti-tank rifle killed half a dozen Japs as they jumped out of the trucks. But reinforcements arrived and Kum Singh was heavily outnumbered. He knew that if the Japs got past him the work of the demolition squads on the railway would be seriously jeopardized. Holding the enemy off with a deadly curtain of fire, he sent a runner back to No. 6 party for reinforcements.

Taffy Griffiths immediately joined Kum Singh with his own Burma Rifles, sending a runner to inform Calvert of what had happened and another to No. 2 party to ask Captain Silcock if he could release a section. Meanwhile Thompson loaded the wireless sets, which were right in the open, on to the mules and moved them across the railway into the jungle to the south where No. 3 party had taken cover.

All afternoon Subadar Kum Singh held his ground. About 3.30 there was a series of terrific explosions as Calvert and Silcock detonated their charges on the railway. They had mined the line in seventy-five places. Then the demolition groups went to work on the steel bridges. The biggest, with a one hundred-foot span, took forty-five minutes to mine, the two slightly smaller ones about half an hour apiece. Calvert and Silcock guessed that the Japs, accustomed to almost daily R.A.F. sweeps over Burma, would be well equipped with replacement girders. Accordingly, they blew up the brick-topped abutments into which the girders had to be fitted, drilling holes in the stone and planting heavy charges in them. The abutments themselves would take months to rebuild. Before the demolition squads had finished they ran out of gelignite and fell back on ammonal, which did the job just as effectively.

In the north Kum Singh and Griffiths had been forced to give ground, and the Japs were ensconced in the village, whose inhabi-

Enlargement of Area around Station



THE BATTLE OF NANKAN

tants had fled at the first sound of gun-fire. Calvert's party, working its way back to the station from the south-west, was left with a sixty-foot span bridge over a stream when the enemy started to rake the bridge with machine-gun fire from an armoured car that had come down to reinforce the first two truckloads of troops ambushed by No. 4 party. Corporal Day and another of Calvert's men crawled on to the bridge, laid their charges under fire, and made a dash for cover on the other side. Neither of them was hit. It was now 4.30 and the demolition groups had been working three and three-quarter hours. Six miles of railway and three bridges were a complete shambles.

At this point Corporal Day suddenly yelled to Calvert: "Look what's coming, sir!" Down the track leading from the mountains out onto the railway trudged a party of fifty British soldiers. Their leader was Captain Erik Petersen, a Free Dane officer in the British Army. They had lost contact with their column, Major Gilkes, Petersen explained, and had marched for three days on banana palms, jungle roots, and a few handfuls of uncooked rice. Exhausted as they were, they constituted a useful reinforcement.

Calvert, in tremendous spirits after the success of operations on the railway, decided to attack the Japs. He deployed his men in battle formation, laid on his mortars, and opened up with a terrific burst of fire. The first mortar bomb scored a bull's eye on one of the enemy trucks, and the Japs didn't wait for any more. They broke and fled northward into the jungle, leaving behind a pile of dead. Calvert sent orders to all sections to push off to the rendezvous. No. 5 party planted booby traps along the motor road. (On the return journey Calvert's men discovered that these booby traps had blown up a Jap truck and tankette.) At the rendezvous Calvert stopped for food and tea and took a roll-call. The force had not suffered a single casualty. Subadar Kum Singh was afterwards awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal for the skill and courage with which his party covered the demolitions on the railway.

That night Thompson finished encoding the message, which had been interrupted at Nankan, calling on the R.A.F. to bomb Naba, Indaw, and Wuntho. He also wirelessly a full report of operations on the railway to Brigade Headquarters. Back came a two-word message from the Brigadier, which for a minute had them completely stumped. Thompson was racking his brain for a two-word quotation from the Bible, when Calvert exclaimed, "I've got it." It was an expression Wingate had used any number of times to congratulate

a column during the training period. The message said: "Nice work"—in Arabic.

The date of the attack on the railway was March 6—Calvert's thirtieth birthday. "Well, Bob," he remarked to Thompson as they pushed off, "that was a hell of a good party." Several months later Calvert received his birthday present—the Distinguished Service Order, one of the highest decorations in the British Army.

Ten miles to the north of Calvert. Major Bernard Fergusson's column had been detailed to destroy the strategic Bonchaung Gorge bridge. Fergusson was the son of a former Governor-General of New Zealand. Tall, slim, aristocratic-looking, with a jaunty light brown moustache and a monocle that never left his eye—he had three new ones dropped to him during the campaign—Fergusson typified the traditional career diplomat. He had the talents, too, of a diplomat; he was a brilliant conversationalist and a polished and witty writer, a regular contributor in peace-time to *Punch* and *Blackwood's*. But by profession Fergusson was a soldier—an officer in the Black Watch; and by inclination a fighter. He had thrown up a comfortable position as lieutenant-colonel on Wavell's staff for this chance to singe the Mikado's beard, and earlier had distinguished himself in the Libyan campaign.

Fergusson's column had marched three hundred miles with scarcely a break when Wingate ordered the attack on the railway. In just under three days he led his men over the last critical stretch to the Bonchaung Gorge, between Nankan and Indaw, through sixty miles of mountain and thick jungle. At Bonchaung station charges were laid along 140 feet of the bridge, and farther on, in the cliffside overhanging the railway. One explosion touched off a landslide that brought hundreds of tons of earth and rock cascading on to the track. It was heard by Michael Calvert ten miles to the south. As he watched fragments of the bridge hurtle skyward, Fergusson exclaimed happily, "All my life I've wanted to blow up bridges."

On the night of March 2 Major Arthur Emmett's column and Major Jefferies' party formed up at the foot of a hill in thin jungle three miles from Kyaikthin, situated on the railway forty miles south of Nankan. They planned to blow up the line at midnight. At 10.30 P.M., just as they were moving off, the enemy put in a surprise attack with two trainloads of troops sent down from Wuntho. It was a model attack carried out with great dash. The

Japs closed in with mortars and Tommy-guns blazing, grenades exploding, and tracer bullets guiding their fire in the pitch dark and made a terrific hullabaloo with fire crackers and wild battle-cries. The Chindits' mules stampeded, knocked over men, and broke up parties assembled for the attack on the railway. Loads came unhooked and equipment was scattered as the animals galloped off in all directions. This was the first time that most of the force had been under fire. It was an ugly situation, but one that had been rehearsed time and again during the training period. The Chindits carried out a lightning dispersal into battle positions. Visibility was nil. Some parties of Chindits and Japs lay a few feet from each other, firing blind at sound. One Gurkha trooper bumped into a figure in the dark and gripped him by the hand. Simultaneously the two men whispered a greeting—one in Gurkhali, the other in Japanese. The Gurkha's reaction was quicker. In a flash he shoved his rifle into the Jap's stomach and pressed the trigger.

Skirmishing and sniping continued all the next day, while the Chindits, making the most of every scrap of cover in the thin jungle, assembled the mules and collected scattered equipment. One large group under Major Emmett found itself cut off with most of its mules killed or missing, the bulk of its equipment gone, and its wireless set lost, and was forced to retreat to the Chindwin. The rest of the force crept down to the railway that night in small parties according to a prearranged drill. At 3 A.M. the Japanese commander heard a sharp explosion, then two more. The first glimmer of daylight revealed that the British had blown up the railway in three places right under his nose, and had vanished, leaving no tracks, into pathless jungle.

The raiders assembled at a rendezvous a few miles from the line and pushed on eastward. Several days later they were joined by Major Dunlop's column at a forward rendezvous ten miles west of the Irrawaddy. Dunlop's men had cut the railway in two places fifteen miles north of Kyaikthin without encountering opposition.

The battle of Kyaikthin had been a reverse. The losses in mules and equipment had been considerable and the Chindits had suffered a number of casualties. One sizable party had been forced out of the campaign. Nevertheless, the two southern columns had so far achieved all of their tactical objectives. They had succeeded in drawing the main Japanese concentrations away from the northern group. They had blown up the railway at five joints according to

plan. They remained a fighting body, and continued to advance towards the Irrawaddy.

X. BURMA'S "GHOST" ARMY

WINGATE had by now achieved two of his main objectives: he had severed the spinal cord of the Jap communications system; he had relieved the pressure on the Kachin Levies to the north. It was from Myitkyina that all the Japanese troops operating against the Kachin Levies in the Fort Hertz-Sumprabum area had been supplied. After the line had been cut the offensive against Sumprabum ceased altogether. But after "messaging up," as Wingate put it, eighty miles of the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway in as many different places the Chindits did not, as the Japanese expected, turn round and head for home. They stabbed deeper and deeper into enemy-occupied territory, wiped out Japanese outposts, sabotaged military stores, put roads and bridges out of commission. They kept an area of ten thousand square miles in a constant uproar, and spread confusion and panic throughout all of Northern Burma.

Day and night each Chindit claimed the agitated attention of more than ten Japanese. The air waves crackled with frantic messages from Japanese field commanders to headquarters in Mandalay: "British force has cut railroad," "British force operating far behind Japanese lines," "British force advancing towards Irrawaddy River." At one point Wingate intercepted a report from one Japanese garrison, which claimed that it had been pushed out of a village by a "huge force" of at least two thousand troops. This outpost had been stormed by a raiding party of sixty men.

The Japs were still utterly bewildered. Was this the remains of the British Army which had retired to India? Or was it the spearhead of an invasion of Burma? Where did the elusive raiders come from, and where were they going? The Japanese rushed reinforcements from Yunnan Province, and sent scouting parties in all directions to comb the jungle. They buzzed around the countryside like bees out of an upturned hive. The Chindits often lay in the jungle at the side of a road watching truckload after truckload of Japs tearing up and down hunting for them. Sometimes they spotted enemy trackers searching for their footprints on the jungle trails; few of

these trackers ever got back to make a report. Patrols clashed. At night scouts bumped into each other in the jungle. But the British Army the Japs were looking for could be found nowhere—because it did not exist. This army of ghosts haunted the Japs, preying on their nerves like the *tap, tap* of the invisible "brain fever" bird that drives men mad in the jungle.

The Brigadier's strategy was to attack the enemy only when and where it suited him. Always in danger of being heavily outnumbered, the Chindits stood little chance in prolonged battles. Wingate did as he had done in Ethiopia, adapting his tactics to the jungle. His columns bedevilled the Japs with murderous nocturnal forays and lightning day-time raids. Information provided by the Burmese led to countless successful ambushes. Again and again Chindits bobbed up from nowhere, hit the astonished enemy hard and swiftly, and melted away into the jungle. Wingate's slogan, radioed to his column commanders, was a verse from Ecclesiastes: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

"Times of darkness, mist, and storm," he told them, "these are our times for achievement. Fight when you have the advantage of surprise. When surprise is lost, break off the action. Never wait for the enemy to attack. Evade him." The Chindits relied mainly on speed of movement to evade Jap concentrations. They would stab at an objective, then cover five or six miles at top speed before the Japs could bring up more troops. Frequently they covered twenty miles, and occasionally thirty miles, of thick jungle a day in a temperature of 105 degrees in the shade. Wingate saw to it that not a moment was wasted. He had forbidden shaving, because it would have meant ten minutes less sleep. Incidentally, he had a theory that malaria could be kept down by constant marching, and he was proved right. There were only one or two cases while the columns were on the march.

When swift movement was impossible the Chindits used a variety of stratagems to give the enemy the slip. The Japs were averse to using the jungle and when patrolling kept to well-defined paths; the Chindits, wherever possible, kept to the jungle. If they ventured on to a beaten track, they took laborious precautions to cover up footprints, and sent out deception groups to lay false trails, planting animal droppings for complete realism. This constant necessity for deceptive measures lessened the boredom of perpetual marching, and became a game designed expressly for the irritation and confusion of "Leftenant Wot-an-army."

Wingate had as yet set no limit to the objectives of the expedition. In pushing eastward his immediate intention was to engage the attention of all the enemy troops in Northern Burma, thus relieving the pressure on the Chinese and drawing up from Mandalay Japanese reserves, which might otherwise have served as reinforcements on the Arakan front. There was also propaganda work to be done in the villages, and certain vital "jobs" had to be carried out east of the Irrawaddy. If things went well there was no telling what might be accomplished. His demolition experts—Calvert, Fergusson, Jefferies, and the rest—were already thinking longingly of the great steel bridges on the Japanese-held section of the Burma Road. Meanwhile there was the Irrawaddy to come.

Casualties had so far been much lighter than Wingate had expected, and the Chindits, thanks to the gruelling months of training, were standing up well to incredible hardships. Water was one of their greatest problems. It was the dry season and water was very scarce. What was worse, Wingate's men had to avoid the obvious drinking places, since they were likely to be watched by the Japanese. Occasionally they ran out of sterilizing tablets; and after dark it was not only difficult to find water but harder still to know whether it was fit to drink. Here the mules were a great help; mules are very fussy about their water. The presence of fish in running water was also a sign that it was not polluted. Whenever the Chindits did bivouac by a stream or hit water by digging, they filled their pint-sized water-bottles, moistening the felt covering to keep the water cool. This much kept them going in comfort for six hours—they were marching constantly in temperatures of over 90 degrees—and could, with great care, be made to last a day. Often they would dig for water in a dozen places without success, and away from the beaten tracks streams were rarer than oases in the desert. Time and again the Chindits went for days with only a few mouthfuls of liquid drained out of the stems of hollow bamboos; it was dark and sweetish but not unhealthy. Sometimes they sucked the moisture out of the fleshy roots of jungle shrubs, or drained the sap from thick creepers. On several occasions to make tea they scooped up handfuls of mud out of evil-smelling buffalo wallows and squeezed the water into a mess tin. Before setting out they had been inoculated against typhus, typhoid, and cholera, and the sterilizing tablets saved them from dysentery on the journey in. But on the homeward march some parties ran out of tablets and dysentery caused heavy casualties.

Wild animals were another source of worry. Most alarming was the trumpeting of elephants which meant that either the Chindits were close to a large enemy force, for the Japanese use elephants as pack animals, or that a herd of wild elephants, which might run amok and stampede the mules, was in the vicinity. In bivouac some of the columns kept piles of dry tinder ready, and when wild elephants came too close for comfort they scared them off by lighting fires. Wingate's men never ran into any panthers or tigers, but often spotted their spoor marks.

On the whole snakes did not give them much trouble—they usually glided away into the undergrowth—but a few men had some close shaves with king cobras. The king cobra is an extremely dangerous customer, with a very poisonous bite. He can be as long as fifteen feet, and will suddenly rear up off the ground to one-third of his length, swaying from side to side poised to strike. Three or four of Wingate's men owe their lives to a lightning jump or a quick trigger finger. At the start of the campaign a number of men got bitten by scorpions when they moved stones to clear a space to sleep, but they learned to be more careful. A scorpion bite made the victim very sick for a day, but doctors were on hand to give quick treatment and there were no deaths.

Worst of all jungle pests were the insects—lice, ticks, and red and white ants. The Chindits often went for a week without water to wash in, and were naturally dirty enough to suit the most demanding louse. The first discovery of lice caused a violent feeling of revulsion, but very soon the men took them for granted and in bivouac held lice-picking contests with a packet of cigarettes or a chocolate bar as prize for the man with the highest score. The lice dozed quietly while the men were marching, and the Chindits could put up with them so long as there was an hour of daylight to pick them out of their clothes before lying down to sleep—a good job of delousing took at least sixty minutes. But very often they bivouacked between dusk and dawn, and it took a tough skin to sleep with lice crawling around, taking a bite here and a bite there.

Ticks sided with the lice to make sleep difficult, and many of Wingate's men still have tick heads imbedded in their skin. The only way to make a tick pull its head out of your skin is to touch it with a red-hot needle. The Chindits just pulled the ticks out with their fingers, and the heads remained buried. One of the most important considerations when hunting for a bivouac was to find a spot where there were no red ants. The red ants in Burma were one-half to

three-quarters of an inch long and extremely pugnacious, with a needle-sharp bite. White ants were not as aggressive where men were concerned but had a nasty habit of nibbling holes in clothes and equipment.

Food was the Chindits' only recreation. They ate their rice in every possible way—mixed with dates, with raisins, with chocolate, and with cheese. They would even burn it a little to change the flavour. The southern force was fortunate in having with it two first-class Madrassi cooks, the two Marie brothers. They had both lived in Burma, spoke good English, and could interpret Burmese, Gurkhali, Tamil, and Hindustani. After a supply-dropping they would whip up a delicious stew made out of cunningly disguised bully beef mixed with vegetables and flavoured with bits of bacon and savoury herbs, which they somehow managed to find in the jungle. Of the British troops Sergeant-Major Blain and Sergeant-Major Chivers, a veteran of the siege of Tobruk, were the most enterprising cooks. Their favourite concoction was "chocolate pudding"—chocolate and digestive biscuits ground up in a mess tin with powdered milk and a little water added. After one dropping in which they received some curry powder they made a porridge of digestive biscuits and cheese, and then curried it.

Times of action told most heavily on the Chindits' rations. Whenever a battle started, the men would think to themselves: "I'd hate to die with food in my pouch. If I don't stop one, I won't mind feeling hungry." At the first lull they would run riot on their rations. Then, when the fighting was over, they would have to march on an empty belly until the next supply-dropping.

The Chindits did not have much time for talking, and a good deal of the time they could not speak above a whisper. As the strain increased most of them had to fight down an hysterical desire to sing and shout at the top of their voices. What conversation there was inevitably centred on food. Their favourite topic was what they would eat and drink when they got back. One group formed a "bacon and eggs club," pledged to live on nothing else for the rest of their lives. Most of the men developed cravings for very simple things—bread and butter, jam, fresh milk, oranges, and all the cold water they could drink. The idea of water became a fixation. They would think longingly of the sound of it splashing into a bath tub, and taps with running water seemed a fabulous luxury. Several men planned, when they got leave, to hire a hotel room in Calcutta,

turn the taps on, and listen to the water running in and out of the bath all day long.

Most of the Chindits' humour had a gastronomic twist. Half a dozen jokes became favourites among the men. Although they were repeated again and again during the campaign, they never failed to produce a laugh. Some of them sounded rather silly after it was all over, but in the jungle they seemed uproariously funny and eased the constant tension. A group of British privates, feeling low and dispirited after marching for days on nothing but rice, were sitting around a camp-fire cooking supper. One of them was listlessly humming a popular English song, "It's turned out nice again," when some wit lifted the lid of his mess tin and chanted gaily: "It's turned out *rice* again." The joke caught on and became a stand-by whenever the men felt tired or downhearted.

The funny man of the expedition was Sergeant Carey, a first-class soldier who had served in China and in the Burma "bush warfare" school, and had performed rearguard demolitions with Michael Calvert in the 1942 campaign. He was a great lumbering fellow, a former heavyweight boxing champion, and carried a Tommy-gun with such unconscious ease that it seemed to have grown on to him. When his column was particularly hungry Carey would crumble a digestive biscuit on a teak leaf, drape a dirty towel over his left arm, and walk around murmuring in his best French accent: "Will Monsieur 'ave some *pate de foie gras*?" His cigarette-girl act was also a big hit with the men. He would cut a flat piece of cardboard out of an empty ammunition container, cover it with leaves, bits of bamboo, a chocolate bar, lumps of earth, and loose cigarettes, and trip round calling out in a shrill treble: "Chocolates, cigars, cigarettes! Chocolates, cigars, cigarettes!"

Corporal Hayes, who was in Sergeant Carey's company, had a very hard head which, when tapped with the butt of a rifle, sounded rather like a coconut. When the men's spirits were flagging, Carey would conk the unfortunate corporal on the head and sing out merrily: "Who'll have a coconut? Lovely milky coconut!"

Dorothy Lamour, too, did her bit to keep up the Chindits' morale. The picture *Moon over Burma* had reached cinema theatres in India the year before, and nearly all the men had seen it. Scouts were always meeting Dorothy in the jungle and had a fine time spinning gaudy yarns about love with Lamour in the moonlight. One night one of these encounters was being described to an appreciative audience when a piping voice cooed from the bushes: "I'm Dorothy

Lamour. Anyone want me ? ” and an excessively hairy private sidled coily up to the camp-fire with a filthy towel draped, sarong-fashion, around his middle.

These jokes may have been feeble, but they were lifesavers at the time. It was as well Wingate's men hung on to their sense of humour, for moments of light relief were few in the hot, under-watered, over-Japped jungles of Northern Burma.

Good news from the other battlefronts helped to keep up morale during the inward march. Whenever possible, the wireless operator in each column listened on headphones to London broadcasts relayed from New Delhi. He scribbled the news down on a piece of paper, which was then passed round among the men. There were few days when the Chindits, deep in the Burma jungle, were not abreast of the latest news from every theatre of war.

Worse than the physical hardships of the campaign was the constant nerve-strain of operating in the heart of Japanese-held territory, heavily outnumbered, with a revengeful enemy all around them.

“ Sounds in the jungle,” one officer afterwards related,

made some of the men very jumpy. The cough of the barking deer resembled the bark of the scouting dogs occasionally used by Japanese patrols. Bird calls might have been enemy signals; our own patrols used them to keep in touch with the column. At night, the sound made by large brittle teak leaves brushing one branch after another as they floated to the ground was very like footsteps in the jungle. It was often hard for a sentry to decide whether or not to give an alarm, and eventually we had to double sentries to lessen the strain.

Every one of us had his bad moments during the campaign, but there were times when we felt we wouldn't willingly be elsewhere and thought pityingly of “ gentlemen in England now a-bed.” We had the exhilarating feeling that comes from knowing you're doing a really worth-while job against terrific odds. And when things went badly some of us at least were fired by the romance of a desperate cause. One thought, I remember, occurred to a good many of us in the jungle. We used to ask ourselves how we could ever have taken the comforts of civilization and the wonder of living so much for granted. It was a sort of New Year resolution spirit, and we vowed to make the most of every single minute when we got back home.

We just didn't admit to ourselves the possibility of not getting out alive. That much was fairly easy. The hardest thing was to fight down the fear of being captured. There was a great deal the Japs wanted to find out about the expedition, and we couldn't afford to think of what they might do to prisoners. We did have

one sample. Late in the campaign, on entering a village, we found one of our officers dressed in Japanese clothes propped up against the wall of a hut. His head was shaven, his hands and feet were tied, and his entrails were hanging out of a ghastly wound in his belly. When he saw us, he said quietly: "For Christ's sake, shoot me." Thank God we had plenty of morphia.

When the campaign was over and the first batch of sick and wounded were on the way to hospital at Imphal a reporter asked one British corporal what he thought of the jungle. "It was bitter cruel," the man answered. An officer beside him added: "Out there we all of us came very close to God."

XI. DOWN TO THE IRRAWADDY

AFTER blowing up the railway Calvert's column headed south-east, aiming at a point on the Irrawaddy about forty miles distant, between Tigyaing and Tagaung. Fergusson had just destroyed the Bonchaung Gorge bridge and was in the Meza river valley heading for Tigyaing. Wingate's group—Brigade Headquarters and Scott's and Gilkes' columns—were following in Fergusson's trail. The southern columns were advancing towards Tagaung on the Irrawaddy, twenty miles south of Tigyaing. Bromhead had been left behind in the Mu valley to act as rearguard.

It was essential at this stage, Calvert realized, to move with the greatest secrecy; if the Japs succeeded in locating them, the crossing of the mile-wide Irrawaddy with mules and heavy equipment might prove a suicide venture. At the same time they were desperately in need of a supply-dropping. For three days they had been racing for the railway line and had run out of rations. They had killed their bullocks and divided up the meat, but there was hardly enough to go round. From here to the Irrawaddy they could not count on buying food, since they would have to steer clear of villages.

Half-way between the railway and the river the column received a radio message from Wingate saying: "Consider area unsafe for supply-dropping. Keep moving or you may get caught." Calvert, however, had been given wide powers of discretion by the Brigadier, and he decided to take a chance. On March 11 his column took a very small daylight dropping done by three Hudsons on a four hundred by fifty yard rice field on the west bank of the Meza river—hard rations, grain for the mules, and batteries for the wireless sets.

In twenty-five minutes it was all over. "It was extraordinarily pretty to watch," Thompson reported later. "After finishing with the parachutes the aircraft circled around, then came up the flare-path in line and released ten bags simultaneously. It was as perfect stick bombing as you would ever wish to see."

With six days' rations from the dropping the great thing now was to keep clear of the Japs. Calvert's men had to have twenty-four hours without Japanese interference to make the Irrawaddy crossing. Their luck was out. A reconnaissance party reported that the Japs were camped in force at Tawma, a village near their line of march to the Irrawaddy. Calvert tried to bypass Tawma without arousing the Japs, but a Burma Rifle, entering a small village east of Tawma early one morning to gather information, was spotted by Japanese sentries and got a bullet through his water-bottle. The Japs took up the chase.

Calvert's column pushed ahead at top speed, laying booby traps on its trail. Marching through the hills, the Chindits heard the Japs put in a heavy mortar and machine-gun attack on the bivouac they had left not half an hour before. "Lumme," someone jested, "there goes my four-poster, silk sheets and all."

Calvert kept going all out for the river. After drawing blood at Nankan the column was itching for another scrap. But this was no place to engage the enemy. Crossing the Irrawaddy under fire would mean heavy losses, which Calvert could not afford. At 2 A.M. on March 13 the Chindits came to a narrow strip of water, waded through it, and found themselves in giant elephant grass, eight to ten feet high. Officers and men were dead beat and when Calvert gave the order to halt they flopped down in their tracks. None of them knew whether they had just crossed a stream or were on an island in the Irrawaddy, and it was impossible to find out in the pitch blackness. All were too exhausted to care.

Calvert was up at dawn and rode off with Lockett to investigate the lay of the land, leaving orders for the column to load up and fall in. He found that they were on a small island about four miles square, separated from the west bank by a narrow channel. The rest of the column saddled up at 7.30 A.M. and were just moving on, thinking they had given the Japs the slip, when they heard the *crump, crump* of mortars and the sharp hammer of machine-guns, and the stuff came whistling over from the west bank of the channel. For two minutes there was unutterable confusion. The elephant Flossie was hit and sent careering off into the long grass trumpeting.

shrilly. They never saw her again. The officers' chargers broke loose and swept through a mortar section knocking men and guns flying. The mules, oddly enough, remained calm and collected, even the ones that had been hit. Several of them just stood motionless with blood spurting out of gaping bullet wounds. Across the track along which the column had been preparing to advance lay a dead Gurkha with one knee blown off and a great hole in his chest. For some reason he didn't bleed but quickly turned a ghastly green colour. Another Gurkha was clutching his middle where a mortar fragment had ripped his abdomen. He was conscious and in awful pain. One of the Burma Rifles had been hit in the face by mortar fragments. Thompson was starting to move the wireless sets into cover when he and Captain Silcock heard a burst of machine-gun fire swinging in their direction and dropped to the ground. The bullets "creased" the seats of their trousers.

The Japs had scored with their surprise punch, but Calvert's rearguard, left to watch the west bank of the channel, was quick in returning the enemy's fire. Calvert himself came galloping back, jumped off his horse, and taking Silcock with him dashed up to the edge of the channel, where he supervised the placing of every man. One machine-gunner and his range-finder were killed, but a Gurkha sergeant at once ordered two of his men into their place and helped them to dig in. Second Lieutenant James spotted a Japanese automatic position only sixty yards away and put a Bren-gun burst right into it. Silcock laid on the mortars, fixed the range, and opened up with everything he had. He judged the range first time, and three-inch mortar bombs started to land in the elephant grass right on top of the Japs. Their fire slackened and they pulled back some way into the jungle.

Calvert now ordered Thompson, Lockett, and Griffiths to get the men down to the east tip of the island. "We've got to cross twelve hundred yards of Irrawaddy," he said grimly. "And we've got to do it before they can bring up more troops. It's the only way out."

At twelve noon the column assembled for the crossing. A small covering force remained in position by the channel to hold off the enemy. It was the dry season and long sandbanks ran out a hundred yards or so into the Irrawaddy. The men gathered on the sandbanks. They were all a bit jumpy after being surprised in the dark and suffering their first battle casualties—seven dead and four wounded. Behind them they could hear the rearguard still exchanging bursts

of fire with the Japs. Ahead of them lay a deep, swiftly flowing river three-quarters of a mile wide. No one had the ghost of an idea what lay on the other side, and every man realized they might land in a Japanese trap. In fact, it looked very much as if they would. Five miles to the north they could see a Japanese heliograph flashing signals into the sunlight.

The Burma Rifles managed to collect a few boats from the villages on the island and the crossing got under way, with agonizing slowness. The round trip took forty-five minutes, an eternity to the men waiting their turn on the east tip of the island. Thompson was standing on a sandbank looking after the wireless sets. "Only half a dozen boatloads had made the crossing," he afterwards related, when I suddenly heard the hum of planes coming from the east. I took a quick look around. We were right in the open. There wasn't a scrap of cover. "Christ," I said to myself, "we've had it." Mike Calvert called me over. "What do you think they are, Bob?" "Well, sir, they're coming the wrong way to be ours." "That's what I thought," Calvert said very quietly. We waited, staring hard into the glaring sunlight, feeling each second creep by.

Suddenly a cluster of silver shapes dipped out of the clouds four thousand feet above us, and I caught the lovely roar of good old Rolls Royce engines ticking over. I counted them—three Hudsons and ten Hurricanes. They must have just finished a supply-drop to a column in front. If those planes had been Japs they'd have had a field day. The relief was so great you just weren't conscious of any. I stood there and wept like a silly old woman. Someone shouted: "If ever I hear anyone say anything against the R.A.F. I'll knock his damned block off."

Just as the planes disappeared into the blue we saw another heartening sight, a small convoy of Burmese sailboats coming upstream. We hailed them and easily persuaded their owners to ferry us across. Each boat carried ten men. Now we had a real fleet.

The four wounded went over first under the care of our doctor, Captain Rao of the Indian Medical Service, a splendid chap who never let anything worry or depress him. He was so thin we used to call him "the stick of bamboo," but he could out-march the best of us. The year before he had served with the British 17th Division, which fought the rearguard action under General Alexander, and he had seen the worst of the retreat. Rao gave the less seriously wounded first-aid, and operated then and there on the Gurkha who had been hit in the stomach.

Getting the mules across was simply awful. It produced more swear words in four languages than you've ever heard in your life. Men were cursing in English, Burmese, and Gurkhali. I supplied Chinese for good measure. It's a fine language to swear in. You

can say things in Chinese that you can't even imagine in English.

The Burmese villagers were magnificent. They caught our tension and worked like madmen. At dusk we called up our rearguard. Mike Calvert sent me over to organize patrols on the east bank. He stayed behind on the island with five men to round up the rest of the mules. The six of them held their revolvers in their hands and were stripped to the waist, all ready to jump and swim for it if the Japs came up. The boats kept going to and fro, pulling the mules over one by one. We were racing desperately against time. Just before sundown we had noticed smoke fires on both banks of the river, above and below where we were crossing—Jap patrols trying to signal our whereabouts to their main bases. To make matters worse, on the far bank we found an impenetrable wall of thick elephant grass, which blocked our line of march to the east. The only direction we could move in was up or down the bank, where one section with a machine-gun could have mowed us down.

At 8 P.M. Calvert himself crossed and decided to call a halt. We had twenty-one mules over out of about eighty. The rest were devils, and we were all dead beat. We'd been marching for days, and had had four hours' sleep the night before. Besides, the Burmese were getting worried about their supper.

Calvert was in a fighting mood. "I'm damned if I'll let the Japs collar any of my mules or equipment. If the little bastards catch us, we're going to fight it out, and if necessary, die. There's no better way of dying than behind a gun." We moved machine-guns into position, laid on the mortars to cover our flank, and held a council of war. Oddly enough, I remembered gloomily that the next day was March 15—the Ides of March.

Calvert decided to go to it again after the Burmese had had their food. His plan was to get over enough mules to carry the vital equipment—mortars, machine-guns, grenades, and wireless sets—to scrap half of our bedding, and man-handle the Bren-guns and ammunition. He called for volunteers to go back across the river for the mules. "Work till twelve," he said. "Bring over as many as you can. Pick the ones that are in good shape and shoot the rest." We padded down the bank into the boats and started slogging back and forth, dog tired, cursing the mules, the Japs, the river, and the damned lousy war. I remember standing knee-deep in the Irrawaddy, tugging at a mean mule, and thinking: "This is a hell of an act for an R.A.F. pilot."

While the rest of the men slept scouts combed the elephant grass on the east bank for a track leading into the jungle. They found one just before dawn, and the column moved off. No one had had much sleep, but there was a tremendous feeling of exhilaration all round. They had put another great river behind them. They had pulled out of a surprise attack with only eleven casualties, and had given

"Leftenant Wot-an-army" a bellyful of mortar and Bren-gun fire. Minus Flossie and with fewer mules the column was a much more mobile body, and the spare mule leaders could reinforce the fighting platoons. "Now," said Calvert exultantly, "we can take on anything we meet."

Calvert's men had been marching for about an hour when they ran into half a dozen bullock carts loaded with rice and potatoes for the Japs. A quick deal went through, silver rupees changed hands, and Private Tojo lost his rice and potatoes. At 2 P.M. the Chindits found a cool, damp clearing by a stream and had their first cup of tea in forty-eight hours. For security, they moved on and bivouacked in the jungle. Their elation at having crossed the Irrawaddy was marred that night by a tragic accident. As they entered the bivouac area a Gurkha tripped and fell on a sharply pointed piece of bamboo. It pierced his right eye and penetrated his brain. He died without regaining consciousness.

Next morning the column marched on. At the first halt Burma Rifles scouts found a village, and came back with tomatoes and some scraggy Burmese chickens. That afternoon the Chindits feasted: it was the first square meal they had eaten in two weeks. Normally orderlies cooked for the officers, who had work to do when the column halted. But this was a great occasion and every officer supervised his own dish. Each man had a piece of chicken, five or six small egg-shaped potatoes, tomatoes, and salt—a delicious stew. The Chindits had not tasted potatoes since entering Burma, and gloated over them like thirsty Cossacks over a bottle of vodka. They boiled them in their skins and even drank the water they had cooked them in.

That evening a patrol brought in startling information. Another of Wingate's columns was only three miles to the south. Calvert changed his plans for moving straight ahead that night, veered off southward, and bivouacked close by the other column, which turned out to be Major Dunlop's plus Jefferies' party and what was left of the column that had clashed with the Japs at Kyaikthin. They had crossed the Irrawaddy at Tagaung, eight miles to the south of Calvert.

Next day the officers from both columns met to compare notes. It was March 16, the eve of Saint Patrick's Day. Calvert and Jefferies—both Irishmen—were worried as to how they would celebrate the occasion; before his last supply-drop Jefferies had appealed to base for a bottle of Irish whisky but was told there was

none to be had. However, his party was well stocked with bully beef, hard rations, raisins, and rum, and he invited Calvert to dinner. Calvert hit upon the idea of brewing a punch. He emptied the raisins into a mess tin filled with water and put it to boil over a wood fire. Jefferies heated a jar of rum, set fire to it, and mixed the flaming rum with the raisins and water. The concoction was a great success.

After toasts had been drunk to Saint Patrick, to Wingate, and to the expedition, Jefferies produced a handful of native cheroots—bamboo shavings loosely wrapped in green tobacco leaves—and listened to Calvert's account of his march from the railway. Then Jefferies told his story:

I became detached from the rest of my party during the battle of Kyaikthin and crossed the railway with Corporal Hayes. The whole of the southern force was to rendezvous ten miles west of the Irrawaddy. We could have got there in under forty-eight hours by following the beaten trails, but we didn't want to have the Japs on our heels and struck off through the jungle. We hit an appalling stretch which slowed us down to five or six miles a day, and I soon realized it was going to take us three or four days to make the rendezvous. I warned Corporal Hayes to go easy on his rations; we had less than one day's supply apiece and no water.

During our third day's march two rather queer things happened. It was very sultry with a stifling head wind, and the tops of the tall bamboos made an eerie noise grinding against each other. After trekking all out from the railway through the driest, deadest-looking jungle I've ever seen, we were done in and may have been a bit light-headed from hunger and thirst. Anyhow, quite suddenly, above the creaking of the bamboos, I heard a very strange sound. I thought at first that it was an effect of the trees and the wind, but then I caught what sounded like native music on a crude reed pipe. It seemed to be very close. Corporal Hayes heard it too. We never found out what it was.

A little farther on in the middle of thick teak jungle, we came to a disused timber camp, with old broken-down shelters. I stopped, to take a compass bearing. I must have been rattled by the music, because I had an uneasy feeling that we were not alone. I was standing taking my bearing when I heard a rending noise, and Corporal Hayes yelled, "Look out, sir!" I saw the top of an eighty-foot teak tree crashing down—and jumped. It hit the ground exactly where I had been standing. The whole thing struck me as very odd, since the wind was rather light. By now I was quite convinced the place was haunted, and we pushed on in a hurry.

The next day we were so starved that at dusk we ventured into a village to buy food. The natives loaded us with chickens, rice, eggs, and a jar of rice wine. They have a . . . on that

the wine isn't intoxicating when drunk at certain hours of the day. We couldn't wait to find out. We drank it then and there and it was a good pick-me-up. Next morning we reached the rendezvous and joined up with the rest of the southern force.

Some of the men in my party, I discovered, had had miraculous escapes at Kyaikthin. One private had the heel of his boot blown off by a mortar, got a bullet through his pack and another through his ammunition pouches—and wasn't scratched himself. We had lost several mules in the battle, and one of their leaders—his name was Lal Bahadur (Red the Fearless)—was the happiest man in Burma. When he reported to me, I asked him where his mule was. Grinning all over he said: "Niche, sahib, niche" ("Dead, sahib, dead"), as though he had killed a dozen Japs. I knew that he had his heart set on joining the fighting platoons, and promoted him to the exalted rank of orderly.

A short march brought us to a village where the headman spoke Urdu. He was delighted to see us and gave us tomatoes, bananas, breadfruit, and green coconuts. On March 8 we started up a steep mountain range (the Gangan Range), overlooking the Irrawaddy, and bivouacked on the top the following night. The jungle was so thick I had to climb a tree to see the river. We had no food left except rice and there was no water to cook it in, so we gnawed on a few handfuls of uncooked rice, and went to sleep dreaming of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. It was bitterly cold, and the whole lot of us—officers, N.C.O.'s, and privates—huddled back to back for warmth.

The next morning I led a party down to recce the crossing. I saw two or three trading boats sailing downstream. They weren't really boats, they were enormous bamboo rafts, forty yards long by fifteen wide, with huts built on them. We hailed them and bought their cargo of *jagri* balls¹ and native cheroots. It suddenly struck me that it would be a grand idea to sail down the Irrawaddy to Mandalay on one of these rafts, hiding in the hut during the daytime and stopping at night to blow up the railway where it runs close to the river. Then we'd cruise all the way to Rangoon, pirate a ship, and sail her back to India. But more of that later.

We crossed the Irrawaddy without interference. Some of the Burma Rifles wept when they saw the river. It was their home; they'd lived on its banks for years before the war. Half-way through the crossing a Jap reconnaissance plane—the oldest crate I've ever seen in the sky—came flying slowly up the river and showered us with leaflets. It went stuttering up the Irrawaddy and disappeared into the heat haze. The leaflets were printed in English, Urdu, Karenni, and Burmese, and were addressed to "The pitiable Anglo-Indian Soldiery." They started: "You are

¹ *Jagri* balls are native toffee, made about the size of a plum, of sweet, hard molasses from the juice of the toddy palm, out of which the natives also distil the local rum.

a beaten army, surrender." That amused us no end; we had very different ideas. They told the men they were being led to certain death by bestial British officers, and urged them to desert, march to the nearest village, and ask to be led to the Japanese, who would treat them kindly. Can you imagine any of the "Anglo-Indian Soldiery" walking over to the Japs after what they had done to prisoners in '42? I heard one little Gurkha muttering scornfully: "Private Tojo, very dirty liar." However, all of us were really rather grateful for those leaflets. They came in very handy for sanitary purposes.

We had scheduled a supply-dropping for March 11, but were bivouacked on the east bank of the Irrawaddy, some distance short of the rendezvous, when we heard the faint hum of planes approaching from the west. The R.A.F. men tore down to the sandbanks and lit fires quicker than a bunch of super Boy Scouts. The planes flew past us and we thought they'd failed to spot the fires. We'd done some very fancy swearing at the pilots when we saw them circling back towards the flare path.

The first dozen parachute loads were neatly grouped on the sandbanks. We were so hungry that we started cooking a cheese and biscuit "soufflé" over the fires while the planes were still dropping supplies. It was the first really good meal most of us had eaten since the eve of the battle of Kyaikthin ten days before. Unfortunately, a wind got up before the third plane had unloaded and the parachutes began to drift into the river. There was nothing for it but to cancel the rest of the dropping.

We pushed on due east and eventually found a good site for another supply-drop. By this time we were absolutely fed up with biscuits, and wirelessly to Peter Lord: "O Lord, give us bread." Back came a message from base saying: "The Lord hath heard thy prayer." The planes flew over next day, March 14, and, lo and behold, down from the heavens tumbled a sack containing sixty loaves of bread. We also got bully beef, bacon, beans, onions, rice, and rum—enough to last us six days. Two days' marching brought us here. And that, Michael, is how you came by this bang-up St Patrick's eve dinner.

On St. Patrick's Day Calvert and Jefferies started debating the next move. After crossing the Irrawaddy Jefferies had told his party of his plan to sail down the river to Rangoon, a mere five hundred miles through the core of the Japanese occupation. The men were in great spirits and agreed it was a splendid idea. For the past three days Jefferies and his officers and N.C.O.'s had talked of nothing else. They had worked out the details very carefully, and had even selected on the map points at which they would stop to blow up the railway. They would proceed cautiously, spending three months on the river if necessary. At Rangoon they were determined to pirate a really big ship and sail her back in triumph to Colombo.

Michael Calvert put forward another idea, which he himself was not able to carry out since his column had orders from Wingate to attack a great strategic objective far to the east. More feasible than Jefferies' plan, Calvert argued, would be to blow up a hill section of the trunk motor road between Mandalay and Maymyo, roughly a hundred miles to the south. After some discussion Calvert convinced Jefferies that the odds against his ever reaching Rangoon were higher than the longest shot in the Derby. Rather regretfully Jefferies dropped his own idea in favour of Calvert's less extravagant suggestion, which involved nothing more dangerous than staging an attack on a key line of communication in the heart of the heaviest Jap concentrations in Burma. At least the chances of carrying out a successful demolition of the Mandalay-Maymyo motor road were as high as one in five, and the odds against getting back alive not more than ten to one.

The next move was settled. Meanwhile both Calvert's column and Jefferies' party were in need of a large supply-dropping—boots, clothing, food, and new equipment. On March 18 they parted company, each bound on a mission that saner men would have called a suicide venture.

XII. "LORD PROTECTOR OF THE PAGODAS"

ONE of the major objectives of the Wingate expedition was to sound out feeling among the Burmese, enlist their sympathies, and strengthen their confidence in an Allied victory. This task was carried out by Wingate's own Brigade Headquarters.

The population of Northern Burma is almost entirely rural. In the mountain country to the west, north, and east live primitive hill tribes—Chins and Kachins—who are racially distinct from the Burmese proper and, before the Japanese occupation, were outside the sphere of the Burma Legislature. They were loosely governed by a small group of Frontier Service Officers responsible to the Governor of Burma. They have shown no interest in Burmese politics, and are staunchly loyal to the British. The Chins and Kachins, plus another tribe, the Karens, who have moved down into the plains, account for the bulk of the enlistments in the Burma Rifles and make splendid fighters. The Kachins, in fact, have since 1942 successfully held out round Sumprabum and Fort Hertz

against repeated Japanese offensives. Most of the Burmese proper in Northern Burma inhabit the river valleys, and live by cultivating their small plots of land. They too—except in the Shwebo district—have little political consciousness and have never been greatly aware of the nationalist movement which had obtained a vigorous following among the urban population concentrated in Lower Burma.

Japanese rule in Burma has followed the usual Axis pattern. The country has been granted its 'freedom,' subject to Japanese military control. Dr Ba Maw, who won Tokyo's favour by his pro-Japanese activities prior to the Japanese invasion, is puppet premier of a Quisling Government and nominally has dictatorial powers. Each of his Ministers, however, is shadowed by a Japanese "adviser." Should active unrest develop on any large scale in Burma, Ba Maw and his Cabinet provide the Japanese with convenient scapegoats.

Ba Maw's main support among the Burmese comes from the extreme nationalist party, the Thakins ("masters"), who supplied the bulk of the Fifth Column during the 1942 campaign. The Japanese attempt to organize a "Burma Independence Army"—now, perhaps significantly, entitled "Burma Defence Army"—has been as spectacular a flop as Hitler's efforts to recruit Quisling "Legions" in Europe. The total strength of the Burma Defence Army is little more than five thousand. It is composed of untrained urban riff-raff who make low-grade soldiers. Its commander-in-chief, Aung San, a twenty-seven-year-old graduate of the University of Rangoon, has grandly conferred upon himself the rank of Major-General. If the Japs place any reliance upon the Burma Defence Army, it will be fortunate for the Allies, as Wingate's column was to discover after crossing the Irrawaddy.

In Northern Burma, Wingate learned, there is now no regular system of administration, Japanese or otherwise. Headmen are summoned once or twice a month to Japanese military centres and given their orders. They are expected to provide labour to build roads and bridges and always to have on hand enough chickens and rice for a patrol of fifty men. Payment is made by the Japs in paper currency, printed in English because the Burmese are used to it; the Japanese notes carry no promise to redeem, no signature, and no serial number. Periodically Japanese patrols, usually commanded by non-commissioned officers, check up on each village to see that orders have been carried out, and to extort taxes in the form of more food and labour. If the N.C.O. in charge is dissatisfied, the headman is shot and the village burned down.

Wherever Wingate went he heard the same complaint: "No salt, no cloth, no doctors." The Japanese occupation has cut off the villagers of Northern Burma from markets for their staple product, rice, and has deprived them of salt, cooking oil, cotton cloth for their *longyis*, and medical supplies. In one village the Brigadier noticed vaccination marks on a man's arm, and asked who had done it. "That was done two years ago," the man replied, "by the Government." The natives often referred to the British as "the Government," but called their Japanese rulers "the Japanese." They frequently asked Wingate when "the Government" would return to restore trade and stamp out the smallpox, which was spreading because of Japanese neglect.

At every unoccupied village on the line of advance Wingate paused long enough to broadcast a manifesto and distribute leaflets.¹ The Brigadier himself had drawn up the manifesto with the help of his Burmese officers, who acted as spokesmen. One of them was a Burmese prince, heir apparent to one of the Shan states, who had volunteered to go back into Burma to rally his people to the Allied cause. Another was Captain Aung Thin, a thirty-seven-year-old Cambridge-educated Burmese, who acted as the Brigadier's personal adviser and interpreter. In this manifesto, Wingate spoke of his men as "Chindits" and in simple, picturesque language told of the growing strength of the Allies and the certainty of Burma's deliverance from the Japanese. "Our force," he said, "is stronger than it appears. We who have come among you can summon from afar great and mysterious powers of the air"—the R.A.F. daily made good his boast—"and will rid you of the fierce, scowling Japanese."

Wingate did not call on the Burmese to fight for the British or rashly to endanger their lives and their homes, and always made it clear that his force did not intend to remain in the country. He paid generously in silver rupees for food and the loan of boats. The natives greatly preferred Indian rupees to Japanese paper money, which in many places was considered completely worthless.

The villagers had been warned against assisting the British on pain of death and wholesale reprisals, and had been promised rewards if they killed or took prisoner any members of the expedition. In spite of this, most of the Burmese were friendly to the Chindits. As a result of the efforts of Wingate's column, recruits

¹ The Burmese proper are the most literate people in the Orient: 62 per cent of the male population can read.

came forward in some places to join the Allied cause, and volunteers offered to guide the Chindits over secret jungle trails unknown to the Japanese. Without this co-operation several parties would probably have been tracked down and annihilated. At many villages the *pongyi* would lead them to the temple, where a gift of bananas had been laid out for them. Wingate always returned the compliment by contributing a bag of rupees to the temple fund. The Burmese reverently named him “Lord Protector of the Pagodas.”

It was clear to Wingate’s men that the people of Northern Burma were beginning to dislike their Japanese masters pretty heartily. After the campaign Captain Aung Thin described two incidents which, he said, were typical of the experiences of the expedition. “In the first instance,” he related,

I entered a village alone—I can’t mention its name—and was quickly surrounded by a band of villagers armed with sticks and *dahs*, long Burmese swords. They demanded fiercely whether I was working for the British or the Japanese. I replied: “Peace be unto you, friends, I am a Burman like yourselves. I fight on the side of the British to free Burma from the Japanese. I come with good will for your help and assistance. If I gain it, I will reward you.”

They were friendly, and supplied me with food and all the information I wanted. They also told me that the Japs had issued orders that if five or fewer British troops should enter a village, they must be attacked and overpowered. If a greater number, they must be given to believe they were safe while information was sent to the Japanese. In no instance that I know of were we ever betrayed in this way. We did, of course, reckon on the fact that the villagers would be forced to give the enemy information about our movements. That can hardly be held against them. They were defenceless, and to have defied Japanese pressure would have meant suicide for the whole village concerned. We know that a number of brave Burmese lied to the Japs about our whereabouts.

The second episode that sticks in my mind occurred about the middle of the campaign. I was approaching a village with a section of Burma Rifles when the inhabitants, who had heard that British troops were in the neighbourhood, flocked out to meet us. They gave us the food supplies they were supposed to keep in store for Japanese patrols, and were reluctant to accept payment. One of the elders of the village made a little speech of welcome and expressed hopes for an Allied victory. “I can speak for this part of Burma,” he said. “We had peace, we had plenty, we had fairness and justice and happiness, and the Japanese have robbed us of these things. Burma waits and prays for the day when the cruel Japanese will be driven out forever.” This old man was

speaking for his part of Burma. I think that what he said is true of most of Northern Burma today.

Japanese rule, the natives complained to Wingate's Burma Rifles officers, was all work and no play. The Burmese villager has a keen sense of humour, is easy-going and light-hearted, fond of gay-coloured clothes, theatricals, and sports—pony races, cock-fighting, and *chinton*, the native brand of basketball. Buddhism teaches him to be kind and friendly, and he hates a bully. The Japanese soldier of occupation is incapable of friendliness, devoid of humour, and treats the Burmese harshly. The only way he knows of winning co-operation is to go round the villages shooting off the headmen. The extent of Japanese atrocities in Northern Burma shows a wanton stupidity, which has in no time given the lie to Japanese propaganda and has punctured for ever the myth of "co-prosperity." In Lower Burma it may be a different story. But there too an invading Allied army may find that large sections of the population have discovered they were far better off before the Japanese occupation.

Wingate's Brigade Headquarters crossed the Irrawaddy with Scott's and Gilkes' columns near Inywa, eighteen miles north of Tigyaing. Once over the river, Wingate learned that the villages to the east were occupied by contingents of the "Burma Defence Army." Captain Aung Thin volunteered to tackle them single-handed with some leaflets and a loudspeaker. He pushed forward into the villages, and harangued the natives right under the nose of the enemy's mercenaries to such good effect that the ambiguous "defenders" withdrew to their houses, barricaded themselves in, and took no further part in the campaign. For this and other work which, in the words of the official citation, "demanded not only great tact and knowledge of the country, but also consistent personal courage of a very high order," Aung Thin received the D.S.O.

Wingate's column advanced eastward, continuing its propaganda work in the villages. The Japs by now were swarming over the countryside like flies, and not a day went by without a scrap. One morning, one of Wingate's raiding parties spotted a Japanese patrol standing beside a truck in the middle of a village. The Chindits sneaked up and rushed the Japs with fixed bayonets. Only one escaped; he jumped into the driver's seat, flung the truck into gear, and drove away in a cloud of dust. Another time Wingate sent a British scout to reconnoitre a village after dark. The scout saw a group of men squatting around a campfire. He mustered his few

words of Burmese and asked : " Are there any Japanese here ? " The men stared at him blankly, and he realized they were Japs. He pulled the pin out of his grenade and tossed it into the middle of the fire. Then he ran back to report that there were no Japs now in the village. In one jungle scrap a section of Gurkhas saw their British officer shot. One of them at once rushed the Japanese commander with his *kukri* and had him down in a flash. Then he dragged the body back, and laid it out carefully at the feet of the dead British officer.

After destroying the Bonchaung Gorge bridge on March 6 Major Fergusson's men raided an enemy outpost at Kyauk-in and killed fifteen Japs. Then they marched down to the Irrawaddy without encountering any Japanese. Fergusson calculated that the enemy would be hunting for them up secluded creeks and boldly decided to cross at Tigyaing, a large town and steamer station on the Irrawaddy. He led his men into Tigyaing in columns of threes with arms at the slope, and stopped to deliver an address to the natives. " I made a stirring speech," Fergusson afterwards related, " explaining that we were not the glorious returning British Army *this* time, but that we had come to kill Japs, find out about conditions, and generally to say, ' Cheer up—the time will come. ' " While Fergusson's column was in Tigyaing a Jap plane showered the town with leaflets, the same as the ones dropped on Jefferies' party at Tagaung. Fergusson read a leaflet aloud to the troops because he thought it would do the inhabitants good to see them laughing at it. He was not disappointed.

The crossing of the Irrawaddy was carried out in broad daylight on March 10. Four-fifths of the column had reached the east bank, and the rearguard was just drawing off when the Japs arrived. Fergusson himself commanded a small covering party which held off the enemy while the rearguard made the crossing. Then his men piled into the last boat, and shoved off with bullets whizzing all around them. Fergusson was the last man to climb on to the boat, a sampan with a canvas canopy overhead, and there was not a foot of room for him. He crossed the Irrawaddy kneeling on the stern of the boat with his head under the canopy and his posterior acting as a bullet shield for the men in the sampan. It offered the Japs a convenient target, which they did not, however, succeed in hitting. " It would have been a most undignified way in which to meet one's death," Fergusson later remarked to Jefferies. " Yet the

thought kept running through my head: I am the first British officer to have crossed the Irrawaddy on all fours."

XIII. THE SHWELI RIVER BATTLES

BY March 16—the day Calvert and Jefferies met—all Wingate's columns, except for Major Bromhead's which had remained in the Mu valley as rearguard and had been scrapping continuously with the Japs, were well to the east of the Irrawaddy. They were spread out inside a quadrangle formed by the Irrawaddy on the west; its tributary the Shweli, which rises in the mountains of China, to the north and east; and the Nam-mit River to the south. At this point the expedition was roughly equidistant from Assam, Tibet, and China.

In the north Wingate, Scott, and Gilkes were advancing south-east in the direction of Baw. Thirty miles to the south of them were Major Jefferies' party and the rest of the southern force. Fergusson, who had orders to join up with Michael Calvert, had made a wide southerly detour after crossing the Irrawaddy at Tigyaing, and was now a few miles south of Jefferies. Calvert's column was situated due east of Fergusson, six or seven miles to the west of Myitson.

The day after parting from Calvert, March 19, Jefferies' party took a large supply-dropping with the rest of the southern force—boots, uniforms, ammunition, new equipment, knives, mess tins, hard rations, bully beef, onions, and rum. For Jefferies himself there was a copy of a recently published biography of Bernard Shaw by Hesketh Pearson, sent to him by the author.

That night, just as the men were finishing dinner, a patrol reported that the Japs were approaching in force. What food the men could not carry in their packs was hastily cached in the bushes, and the rum—there was no time to bury it—was reluctantly tipped out of the one-gallon glass jars. "'Struth," Jefferies heard one man muttering bitterly, "if we ever get back to tell this story, nobody will even believe it." The Chindits had a stiff tussle to get the mules going, and finally pushed off at midnight. They hadn't gone very far before they heard Jap mortars shelling the bivouac they had just left.

The next morning, March 20, they bumped into Fergusson's column, and spent two days with him while he took a much-needed supply-dropping in a dried-up *chaung*. Fergusson was a comical

sight with his monocle sticking out of a heavily bearded face crowned with a Highland cap. He had just received a radio message from Wingate cancelling his previous instructions to join Calvert, and ordering him to proceed northwards to a rendezvous with Brigade Headquarters near Baw. He and Jefferies concluded that some big do was in the making, and Jefferies decided that his party too would head for the rendezvous. If nothing exciting was afoot, he could at least obtain the Brigadier's blessing for the projected attack on the Mandalay-Maymyo motor road. The countryside was now buzzing with Japanese patrols, and Fergusson and Jefferies agreed it would be safer to split up and find their way separately to the rendezvous.

Jefferies' men trekked back five miles to their last bivouac to collect the supplies they had hidden in the bushes. The Japs had passed through there in force, but had not discovered the cache. After a brief halt the Chindits pushed on. The next stretch of marching was one of the most nerve-racking in the campaign. The jungle was criss-crossed with false trails and the footprints of Japanese patrols, and Jefferies had a hard time setting a course. The Japs were probing for them like sappers for a mine, and all talking was forbidden. At this point one of the Maries—the Madrassi cooks—who at the last post drop had received bad news from home, cracked under the strain and started chanting hymns in Tamil. He marched along in a trance and nothing could silence him. When the party bivouacked at midnight on March 23, he vanished into the jungle: Jefferies was reluctant to leave him to the Japs; he had shown great bravery throughout the campaign and had been recommended for a decoration for his conduct at Kyaikthin. At dawn they hunted around for about an hour and found him sitting beside a clump of bamboo, completely shell-shocked, dolefully mumbling prayers. They pulled him to his feet and led him back into line. In a few days he was normal again, and eventually got back to India alive.

All that day, March 24, they marched to the sound of heavy firing to the north, where Wingate was in action against the Japanese garrison at Baw. They reached the rendezvous five miles from Baw just before dusk. There was no one there. All around were empty cartridge cases and other signs of battle. Jefferies had reason to believe that Wingate had probably moved north-east towards the Shweli river, and pushed on in that direction.

As they were marching along that night one of the mule leaders

came face to face with a red-capped Japanese officer, probably a brigadier, sitting in a bamboo shelter by the side of the trail. They saw each other at the same time. The Englishman reached for his revolver, but the Jap spun around and leapt into the undergrowth, yelling: "Whee, whee, British!"

Just after they had bivouacked in the small hours of the morning a sentry reported that the Japs had crept up under cover of the noise made by the mules, and were about to attack. Jefferies led the men off thirty yards to the flank into a firing position. They waited for a few minutes and nothing happened. Jefferies finally grew bored with waiting and, together with another officer, decided to stalk the position where the sentry had spotted the enemy. When they had crawled to within fifteen yards Jefferies whispered: "Come on now, let's go in boldly." His companion replied softly: "All right. But, as Bernard Shaw says, 'The courage of despair is the worst form of cowardice.'" They fixed bayonets and charged. Next minute they were stumbling over the sleeping bodies of the two Maries.

At dawn on March 25 they passed through a British bivouac and picked up the tracks of a column obviously moving in a great hurry—no attempt had been made to cover up footprints—and probably not very far in front of them, since the animal droppings were still moist. Jefferies prayed that the column was marching too fast to lay booby traps and followed its tracks, stopping now and then to lay a false trail. His party came out into a clearing where one of the columns had taken a supply-drop, but all tracks from the dropping-site had been skilfully covered up. Jefferies was beginning to give up hope of ever contacting the Brigadier when he was challenged by a British sentry, who gave him Wingate's position. That sentry post later reported by wireless that a strong Japanese patrol, which had been tagging Jefferies' men, had been thrown off the scent by a false trail only a mile back. At noon Jefferies reached Brigade Headquarters and discovered it was Fergusson's column he had been trailing. Scott and Gilkes were also with the Brigadier. Wingate greeted him with shattering news: the force had just received orders to return to India. The main objectives of the expedition had been accomplished and the monsoon season, which breaks earlier in Burma than in India, was drawing near.

After Calvert and Jefferies had parted company on March 18 Calvert decided that his men needed a three-day rest while they took a large supply-dropping—they had had none since the small drop



KACHIN LEVIES HARASS THE JAPANESE FROM CUNNING AMBUSHES
IN THE JUNGLE



R.A.F. TRANSPORT PARACHUTES SUPPLIES TO THE RAIDERS IN A
JUNGLE CLEARING

of March 11. Thompson found a small dried-up *chaung*, near which were several deep pools of water, and they made a good start at this bivouac by shooting a nilgai, a big cow antelope, which provided each of them with a lump of fresh meat. On the south side of the *chaung* was a large stretch of tall elephant grass. Two hundred men formed a line about a hundred yards wide and trampled down the grass until they had flattened a strip five hundred yards long. It took three hours of very hard work. Meanwhile some of the Burma Rifles, who were expert tree climbers, stripped the few teak-trees of their branches so that there would be no obstruction to the view of the pilots or to the parachutes as they came down. During the afternoon a message arrived from base reporting that the planes would come over from dusk onward. Before dusk big marker fires were lit, and just as the sun was setting three Hudsons flew over in formation and dropped their loads simultaneously, circling one behind the other with their navigation lights turned on to avoid collision. In twenty-five minutes the Hudsons had released all of their loads and were followed at hourly intervals during the night by DC-3's until ten tons of supplies had been dropped—the biggest single dropping made to any column throughout the expedition. At the very top of the mail canister Thompson found a letter from home, and stood reading it by the light of the fire while the planes were still circling overhead. That dropping was a model of precision; all of the parachutes were strung out neatly down the centre of the target area like a chain of daisies. The round trip from base at this point was eight hundred miles.

Several special items had been requested—an issue of boots all round; a clean kilt, a new set of false teeth, a box of snuff for Geoffrey Lockett, and curry powder for the Gurkhas. The Gurkhas had been looking forward all day to their curry and foraged among the canisters in the dark until they found it. They bore it off in triumph and cooked a late supper then and there. Lockett was equally anxious for a pinch of snuff and went poking around the containers. Thompson was watching the Gurkhas squatting happily beside their cooking-pots when Lockett came up and said, "Dammit, Bob, I can't find my snuff." Suddenly the ghastly truth dawned on both of them. "My God," Lockett shouted, "the Gurkhas and their damned curry." He rushed over, but it was too late. The "curry" was nicely done, and several indignant Gurkhas were already spitting out the first frightful mouthfuls.

On March 22 Calvert cached four days' paratroop rations for each man against an emergency and moved off eastward. To the north he kept hearing the sound of heavy gunfire; it was Wingate's force fighting almost continual battles with the Japs. That evening Calvert's column reached the Nam-mit river, which ran across the line of march to their next target. At dawn twelve Burma Rifles under a British lieutenant waded the stream and cautiously approached a village, Pago, one and a half miles from Calvert's bivouac. Natives warned them that a patrol of sixty Japs was in the village, and two runners were sent back to Calvert. On the way back the runners bumped into an enemy scouting party of about twenty men. One of them made a dash for it with the message, the other dodged behind a tree and at point blank range coolly aimed twelve shots at the Japs. Two dropped a few yards away from him, and he hadn't time to count how many more he had hit. When he turned up at the bivouac he reported two Japanese killed. Later Calvert's men discovered seven bodies on the trail.

Another patrol meanwhile had captured Jap operational orders from a battalion to one of its companies that was hunting for Wingate's men. This, amplified by information from the villagers, gave Calvert a very clear picture of what paths the Japs were using and where their main forces were concentrated. Calvert ordered Second Lieutenant James with two Gurkha sections and a British Tommy-gun section to lay an ambush on one of the trails along which a Japanese patrol was advancing. The ambush party had not been in position for more than an hour when they saw thirty-six Japs, marching down a dust road. When Lieutenant James gave the order to fire, Sergeant-Major Blain yelled out to the front Tommy-gun-man: "T-there you are, my b-b-boy, there's a b-b-birthday for you!" The Japs were taken completely by surprise. This wasn't in their book of rules, and they lost their heads. Instead of scattering, they dropped to their knees on the road and started firing blindly into the jungle in all directions. They were a sitting target. The first volley killed twenty of them. The survivors did the only thing the Japs know how to do when they're caught off guard. They fixed bayonets and charged straight to their death. James picked off five of them with his rifle. His Tommy-gunners wiped out the rest. Not a single one escaped.

Other Japanese patrols, however, heard the sound of firing and closed in, this time with greater caution. Back in bivouac Calvert suddenly heard a voice in the jungle close by, calling "Sergeant-

Major, come over here." He held his fire, thinking it might possibly be someone hunting for Sergeant-Major Blain, but whispered to the men to keep a sharp look-out. A moment later they spotted a Japanese uniform, and Calvert ordered one platoon to make a bayonet sweep from the flank. The Japs let out a frightful yell when the Chindits suddenly piled on top of them with machetes and bayonets. The survivors dropped their equipment and ran. Calvert's casualties were three dead and two missing. Meanwhile Lieutenant James' party had engaged another Japanese patrol and Calvert's column mortar was lobbing shells just over the heads of James' men on to the advancing Japanese. At 4 p.m. Calvert, fearing that the Japs would bring up more troops and surround them after dark, ordered James to prepare to break off the action. The Chindits loaded up the mules and moved back westwards, laying booby traps on their trail. Calvert led them to the dump where they had cached four days' paratroop rations and there bivouacked for the night.

All the next day the column made a wide detour to the south-west with the intention of shaking off the Japs before again attempting to cross the Nam-mit. For several days it had been impossible to establish wireless contact with Brigade Headquarters because, as Calvert guessed, the Brigadier's group had been fighting a battle at and around Baw. At noon on March 25 Calvert halted to see if he could get a report through to Wingate. Brigade Headquarters was contacted without difficulty, and Thompson picked up a message from the Brigadier. It was an order to withdraw from Burma.

At this point Calvert was less than a hundred miles from the Burma Road.

XIV. FIRST MEN OUT

CALVERT summoned his senior officers and told them the news. "I suppose this had to happen," he said regretfully. "There's just over a month left to the beginning of the monsoon. After that we'd have no chance of a supply-dropping and every chance of a dose of malaria. Besides, if we were caught by the rains, we'd have to swim two hundred miles back to India. It's been a lot of fun going forward. But it's not going to be much fun going

back." He decided not to tell the junior officers and men just yet that they were pulling out. The news would be a hard blow to their morale, and Calvert knew that some very tough fighting lay ahead.

Calvert reckoned that to avoid getting caught up in the backwash of the expedition the best course would probably be to make for China, or Fort Hertz in the north. Accordingly he mapped a course for the Shweli river. His column reached the Shweli at noon on March 27 to find that there were enemy pickets in every village. Calvert decided to attempt the crossing at night, and his men spent the afternoon building boats out of bamboo encased in waterproof ground-sheets. An hour before dusk they went down to the water's edge. They had started to cross when they were intercepted by the Japanese, and two men were marooned on the far bank.

The column quickly pulled back into the jungle while Sergeant-Major Blain waited with one section to tackle the enemy's advance guard. After a few minutes Blain spotted a lone Japanese trooper, who must have crawled several hundred yards along the river-bank, leaning back to throw a hand-grenade. Blain's rifle cracked just as the Jap flung his grenade at the section. The grenade fell somewhat wide of the mark. It was a little fellow and went off rather like a Chinese cracker. Blain's bullet caught the Jap right in the throat.

The enemy now attacked Blain's small section in some strength. The Sergeant-Major dodged behind a tree, and did a murderous piece of work with a Tommy-gun. This tidy little massacre stopped the Japs in their tracks, and gave the Chindits time to push some distance into the jungle.¹ The enemy made no attempt to follow them, but went on firing blindly into the trees far behind them.

Calvert retreated several miles to a safe bivouac, and next day sent out scouts to collect information about the strength and disposition of the enemy. Japanese garrisons, he learned, were about a battalion strong in Mabein, Taunggon, and the larger villages. The enemy had brought up troops from Mandalay to encircle the Chindits from the east. A force of seven hundred had just arrived at Myitson. Thompson wirelessly this information to the air base in Assam. Later natives reported that the R.A.F. bombed the Japs at Myitson within seven hours of their arrival, before they had had time to dig trenches, and inflicted two hundred casualties.

¹ Sergeant-Major Blain received the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Calvert's orders from the Brigadier were to ditch equipment and save personnel. "We can get new equipment and wireless sets," said a message from Wingate. "But it will take twenty-five years to get another man. These men have done their job. Their experience is at a premium." Calvert realized that to force a crossing of the Shweli in the face of very strong opposition would mean heavy losses, and so he abandoned plans for striking out towards China or Fort Hertz. He decided to break up the column into small parties and march back westward across Burma to the Chindwin. Meanwhile there remained another problem: the column had run out of rations and was desperately in need of supplies for the long journey home.

The column reveilled at 2 A.M. on March 29 and moved off in search of a dropping-site. Before starting Thompson notified base of the supplies required—some extra Tommy-guns, maps, bully beef and beans, rum, and eight days' paratroop rations per man. At first light they came to a clearing where another column had recently taken a dropping. One parachute container was still hanging from a one-hundred-foot teak-tree, and a Burma Rifle promptly whipped off his shoes and equipment and went skinning up the tall, smooth trunk. In the container were sixty pounds of cheese, a life-saver to Calvert's hungry men. For security reasons they could not take their dropping here, but Thompson found a suitable place five miles farther on.

The planes came over on the night of March 29-30. A little while after the supply-drop, the men heard a voice in the jungle crying, "Sergeant-Major, where are you?" This was a favourite Japanese trick to get the Chindits to betray their position, and Calvert hissed, "Don't answer!" The rest of that night they awaited a Japanese attack, which never materialized. At dawn the owner of the voice, a private from the column, turned up at the bivouac and explained miserably that he had gone about a hundred yards to look for water and had got lost in the dark.

That morning Calvert's men abandoned their heavy equipment, scrapped the wireless sets, and divided up into small parties each commanded by two officers. From now on they were cut off from all contact with the outside world. When their rations ran out they would have to live off the land. The maps they had received at the supply-drop caused a good deal of merriment. When Calvert opened one he called Thompson over. "Take a look at this, Bob," he said. "This shows us the way to go home all right." The map

extended to a point three hundred miles *behind* the British lines on the Chindwin.

At noon all the officers and N.C.O.'s in the column assembled for a last drink together. Calvert and Thompson decided to join forces for the Irrawaddy crossing. "See you in Calcutta," Calvert called out to the others as he and Thompson led their groups off into the jungle. "Provided we keep moving," he said to the men, "and keep our heads, we'll make it. If we have to fight to get food I've every intention of doing so. If we bump any Japs the order is: fly at their throats."

When the column split up each party had taken its quota of mules. Before Calvert reached the Irrawaddy most of his mules were so badly galled that he ordered them to be shot. Yankee was still in good shape, and Thompson was determined to bring him out alive. Calvert and Thompson reckoned that the Japs would expect them to take the shortest route home, and decided to make a detour that would bring them down to the Irrawaddy at a point south of Tagaung. It took them two days to reach the river and there Thompson, who had gone ahead with a runner to reconnoitre the crossing, found on the bank another party from their column commanded by Taffy Griffiths. A number of small boats were moving upstream under sail in the strong afternoon wind. Griffiths had already collected two or three and Thompson signalled to the others to pull in to the bank. He and Griffiths bought their cargoes of rice, tomatoes, *dhal*—a sort of lentil—and *jagri* balls, and the boatmen agreed to ferry them over the Irrawaddy for two rupees a head. Thompson now sent a runner back to Calvert with the message: "*Ventre à terre* to the river." An hour later Calvert arrived with the rest of the party, and they sat down to a vegetable stew cooked by the Burmese boatmen.

Calvert felt that with the large amount of traffic on the river they might get across unnoticed. They decided to chance it, and crossed in the middle of the afternoon, towing Yankee behind one of the boats. The Japs were within two miles of them to the north and south on both banks, but failed to spot them.

The next obstacle was the railway. Between the Irrawaddy and the line they hit a stretch of jungle so dense that one British trooper, who had moved off thirty yards with a message for Calvert, got lost and was never seen again. They ran out of water here, and several men collapsed from thirst and exhaustion and had to be left behind. These were their first casualties to the jungle. There were more to come.

They reached the railway far to the south of all previous demolitions, and Calvert could not resist the temptation of blowing it up here. This naturally brought Japanese patrols racing down to the line, and they were forced to hide in a thick clump of bamboo in the jungle. "What the hell do we do now?" one officer asked. "Let's have a cup of tea," Lockett suggested. And they did.

That night they slipped across the tracks unnoticed. Thompson and Calvert, for security reasons, had parted company before crossing the railway. Thompson led his group all out across the Mu valley—the Mingin range did not extend this far south. In the valley one of his Burma Rifles, Lance Naik (Corporal) Ba Yin, got a bad attack of malaria. They put his pack and equipment on Yankee, and Sergeant George Morris and another Burma Rifle took turns at helping him along. Whenever Thompson asked him if the pace was too fast he shook his head. Sweating and shivering, he kept moving, and in a few days, with the help of extra rations from the other men, he had fully recovered.

As Thompson's men were approaching a village to buy food they again met up with Taffy Griffiths' party and this time joined forces. Shortly afterwards they clashed with a Japanese patrol but did not suffer any casualties. On April 10 they reached the foot of an escarpment, which rose two thousand feet above the Mu valley.

The going across the escarpment was incredibly tough. In one *chaung* Yankee kept slipping into deep pools, and at one point they had to build a ramp of stones to get him out. Several times they tied ropes around his legs and carried him. He was slowing up the party considerably and the other officers wanted to leave him behind. Thompson firmly refused, insisting that a seasoned mountain artillery mule was worth his weight in gold. Secretly he had come to look upon Yankee as their good luck symbol, their talisman against disaster. Yankee had travelled with them every step of the way; he had survived the jungle and the Japs, hunger and thirst, river crossings and mountain ranges. Somehow, Thompson felt, his future and theirs were linked. So long as Yankee stayed with them they were indestructible.

On April 12, after marching from dawn until mid-morning, the Chindits came upon a clear stream high up in the mountains in the middle of thick teak and bamboo forest, shaded from the sunlight by a dense covering of creepers. They were hungry and exhausted, and Thompson decided to rest for the day. Here he delighted the British members of the party by inviting them to share a large tin

of porridge oats, which he had stored in his wireless set throughout the march in, then had carried in his pack for a special occasion. This was the special occasion: it was his twenty-seventh birthday. Later in the day Thompson and three others went fishing with Mills bombs in the pools beside the stream. The explosion of the bomb stunned the fish and brought them to the surface, first the small ones, then some three—and four-pounders. The Chindits dived in to collect them, a tricky job as they slipped away very quickly. Thompson eventually had enough fish to give seventy-five men half a pound apiece. The big fellows tasted rather like English carp. The Chindits grilled them on pointed bamboos over an open fire and ate them with rice.

The approach to the Chindwin was uneventful—except for hunger, thirst, sickness, and grinding fatigue. They came down into the Chindwin valley along the Nangka Mu *chaung*, swollen by recent rains. Burmese villagers told them that two British patrols were on the east bank of the Chindwin looking for them. In one village the headman gave them bananas and, when they asked for a guide, volunteered to go with them himself.

At 2 P.M. on April 15 Thompson's party was within three miles of the Chindwin when a Sikh sentry stepped on to the track and challenged them. Thompson turned to Taffy Griffiths and shook hands. Griffiths muttered happily: "Our troops withdrew according to plan."

The sentry led them to a Sikh captain, who gave them their first cup of tea with condensed milk and telephoned to his column to lay on boats for them on the Chindwin. At the river they were met by a wiry, grey-bearded Sikh colonel, who for several days had been skirmishing heavily with Japanese patrols himself. The crossing was uneventful. Yankee was a bit unwilling to go down into the water, but Thompson patted him on the head, whispered "One more river, old boy," and dragged him in. On the west bank Sergeant-Major Blain remembered his drill, formed the men into threes, and marched them like guardsmen to their billets. The Sikh colonel gave them a wonderful curry dinner, and lent them ground-sheets and blankets.

Thompson, with the R.A.F.'s aversion to marching, had taken pains to hit the Chindwin at the point nearest to where the jeep road began. Next morning they breakfasted with the Sikhs, then marched eleven miles to the jeep road-head. On the way the Chindits, looking like the mutineers of the *Bounty*, met two American colonels

who were visiting the Chindwin front. They had heard all about Wingate's Raiders and recognized the filthy, bearded scarecrows plodding wearily up the track. They shook hands with Thompson's little group of officers and said warmly, "Everyone is proud of you. You've given the Japs something to remember."

At jeep-head the Chindits were congratulated by Major-General Savory, and they immediately asked him if Wingate had got back. Savory shook his head. Major Bromhead's column had returned a few days before. Of the columns that had crossed the Irrawaddy, theirs was the first large party out. There was no news of the Brigadier.

General Savory had a tremendous lunch laid out for them. They had two helpings of everything—meat, vegetables, potatoes, bread and butter, canned peaches and pears, and tea with condensed milk. After lunch they were loaded into jeeps—they couldn't have marched a step anyhow—and driven to Tamu on the Burma border, which they reached in time for an enormous dinner. Yankee got a lift in a one-ton truck and all the grain he wanted. At Tamu the Chindits were deloused, given clean clothes, and taken in trucks to Imphal, where they were clapped into a hospital and put on a diet. As a parting present twenty-seven Japanese bombers with strong fighter escort flew over Imphal and pattern-bombed the hospital, hitting one small block with an incendiary. It was the first time Imphal had been bombed in ten months.

This was on April 21. There was still no news of Wingate.

XV. "PLANE LAND HERE"

WHEN Jefferies reached Brigade Headquarters on March 25 he found Wingate pacing up and down the bed of a dry *chaung*, analysing the position. A large force was now concentrated under the Brigadier; his own column, Jefferies' party, and the three columns commanded by Fergusson, Scott, and Gilkes. The Japs had by this time drawn a tight net around the Chindits. In fact, one of Wingate's patrols had just reported that the enemy knew to within a few miles what area the force was in. Wingate realized that getting out of Burma was going to make the march in seem like a stroll through St James's Park.

"Just put yourself in the position of the Jap commander," he said to Jefferies. "Your one aim will be to prevent anyone from getting

out alive. You've been made to look very stupid. Your superior officers are storming, 'Are you going to let these appalling conditions continue?' There's only one way you can save face, and that's by annihilating the whole expedition. Yes, we can take it for granted that from now on the Jap commander is going to do everything in his power to wipe us out. And the first thing he'll do is make a very strong effort to prevent us from recrossing the Irrawaddy."

After dusk Wingate summoned his senior officers and explained his plan of retreat. He would make a forced march to Inywa, where the Shweli river runs into the Irrawaddy. The Japanese commander would probably have commandeered all boats on the Irrawaddy, but they might find boats on the Shweli. For the sake of speed they would shoot and eat their few remaining bullocks, and would ditch half of their bedding, keeping one blanket and one ground-sheet for every two men. They started off at 1 A.M. and covered the forty miles of vile jungle in two nights' marching. At one of their rest halts on the way a Japanese patrol attacked the tail of the force with mortars, and Wingate detailed Major Fergusson's column to lead off the enemy.

Fergusson headed north-east, making his tracks as conspicuous as possible. In the jungle near Hintha he laid a dummy bivouac and abandoned various tempting articles of equipment with booby traps attached. The Japs did not put in an appearance. Next day Fergusson led two platoons towards Hintha, which seemed a likely place for a Japanese garrison. He reckoned that a battle in this area would draw the enemy away from the Brigadier's force.

"On the edge of the village [Hintha]," Fergusson afterwards related,

sitting round a fire as it might be round a bridge table, were four men talking. They looked up incuriously as I approached. I addressed them in one of my rare Burmese sentences: "What is the name of this village?" (to which I knew the answer, but I was just making conversation). They didn't respond and the truth flashed upon me at the same moment as the man beside me gasped "Japs!" Not only were they more surprised than I was, they were petrified and unable to move. They gazed fascinated at me as I struggled with the pin of the grenade which I had been carrying in my right hand for the last twenty-four hours. They still sat on while there followed a neat lob (though I say it myself) into the middle of the fire, and a most entrancing bang. Then they all fell over outwards on to their backs with perfect symmetry.¹

¹ From "One More River to Cross," by Bernard Fergusson, in *Blackwood's Magazine*, September 1943.

Fergusson was right in his guess that Hintha would be heavily garrisoned. The fight which followed lasted nearly two hours. Fergusson suffered eleven casualties—four killed, including one of his senior officers, Captain Alec MacDonald, and seven wounded. He himself was hit in the leg by two mortar fragments. The enemy's losses were at least thirty. The fact remained that the Japs were in too great strength for the column to get past Hintha. Fergusson decided to break up into dispersal groups, and gave the order to proceed to a rendezvous twenty miles to the north. One of the groups later saw the Japs attack the false bivouac and heard the bangs of booby traps exploding. The bulk of the column reached the rendezvous within the appointed twenty-four hours—a tribute to the training of Wingate's junior officers and N.C.O.'s—and Fergusson's men resumed their march towards the Irrawaddy in search of Brigade Headquarters.

All Fergusson's efforts to pick up Wingate's trail were unsuccessful, and his column had unfortunately lost its wireless set in a river. He finally gave up the chase, led his men across the Shweli, and set a northerly course for the Chindwin, dividing his column into three large dispersal groups. Their supplies consisted of three days' rations per man and a large stock of tobacco. When the rations ran out they lived off the jungle and what food they could buy from the natives.

For jungle reading Fergusson had taken along with him a copy of one of Trollope's lesser-known novels, *Ayala's Angel*. One by one the leaves were torn out to make cigarettes. Fergusson's men "smoked" all six hundred pages.

At the end of April the group commanded by Fergusson reached India with twenty-two casualties out of seventy-four officers and men. Fergusson himself, limping badly from two leg wounds, marched out under his own steam with his monocle neatly fixed in his right eye.

The remainder of the force under Wingate reached the Irrawaddy at a point immediately south of its confluence with the Shweli between one and two in the morning on March 29. The Brigadier learned from villagers that the enemy had established strong points all along the two rivers and was patrolling between these points. As Wingate had predicted, the Japs had taken all boats off the Irrawaddy. Some had been holed and were lying in the shallow water near the bank. The Chindits did, however, find a few boats on the Shweli and carried them down to the Irrawaddy.

Just before dawn they assembled for the crossing. Quickly and silently they began to unload the mules. Every now and then a man would glance anxiously up and down the river or pause for an instant to listen to a sound from the jungle. A zero-hour mood hung over the column. The men realized that this was a crucial point in the get-out. No one dared to hope for an easy crossing.

The sun rose blood-red in a very pale blue sky. The morning air was almost cold. A swift current was running and the Irrawaddy looked wider than when they had crossed it the first time. The whole scene seemed to Jefferies unnaturally peaceful.

Jefferies had been ordered to supervise the crossing. "After nine years in the Navy," Wingate remarked lightly, "you ought to be able to get us across the Irrawaddy." Nine years on a destroyer, Jefferies reflected gloomily, weren't much help when it came to commanding a flotilla of dugouts. He was fighting down an ominous feeling that something would go wrong. Up until now his hunches had usually been right.

The first dugout had pushed off and Wingate's men were tensely waiting their turn to cross when an incongruous thing happened. A boatload of natives popped up seemingly from nowhere and swarmed ashore to peddle their cargo of *jagri* balls and cheroots. Wingate quickly bought up the cargo, borrowed the boat, and the crossing continued.

An R.A.F. rubber dinghy, carrying one of the precious wireless sets, bobbed slowly into mid-stream. Jefferies was standing on the beach. He was in a daze after the long march on half rations and the extra work of organizing the crossing. Every action required a conscious effort. Half in a dream he wondered hazily why the sand on the beach was spitting into the air. It was several seconds before he realized machine-gun bullets were biting into the ground just in front of him. He flattened behind a sandbank and whipped out his field glasses. On the west bank he saw a large party of Japs, then a mortar shell landed with a splash a few feet away from the R.A.F. dinghy. He suddenly felt slightly sick. It wasn't fear, just a tightening at the pit of the stomach. What he knew would happen had happened.

The enemy seemed to be in fairly large numbers on the west bank, but most of his machine-gun and small-arms fire was falling short. Wingate quickly put his mortars into action, and the second burst found the range. The Japs raised their sights, too far this time, and started shooting over the Chindits' heads. Wingate could have

forced a crossing with heavy losses, but orders from India were to bring the men out alive. He made a split-second decision. Standing on a sandbank in the Irrawaddy, looking like some minor prophet with his huge beard and a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, he ordered the beach to be cleared. There was only one casualty. A signalman, bending over to lift a wireless set, had been hit in the head in the first volley.

Jefferies stood beside Wingate on the beach with bullets flying around them, hoping that the Brigadier would break into an undignified double. He did nothing of the kind. Walking slowly towards the jungle, he said to Jefferies: "They are in some strength just behind us to the east; in what strength we don't know but they may be down on us at any moment. They are in considerable strength on the other side. We've got to make ourselves scarce, and pretty quickly. Get all the officers into that dip over there and I'll give them instructions."

Wingate's plan was for the columns to part company, move back into the jungle to the east until they had given the Japs the slip, then make their way separately out of Burma by whatever route seemed safest.

Major Kenneth Gilkes, a former Sussex paint manufacturer, decided to head for China. His men climbed a broad belt of mountains ten thousand feet high, and linked up with Chinese irregulars. The inhabitants of the first Chinese village they reached provided rice for the whole column and refused any payment. "You have fought the enemies of China," one of them explained. "The least we can do is feed you." With Gilkes was Captain Petersen, the Free Dane who had helped Calvert rout the Japs in the battle at Nankan on the railway. After crossing the Irrawaddy Petersen had been seriously wounded in the head and could not sit his horse without help. He was supported in the saddle by relays of men for a march of several hundred miles until he was sufficiently recovered to walk and fight with the rest of them. Eventually Gilkes' men reached the Salween valley front, where the Japanese had been pressing forward when Wingate's columns crossed into Burma. Here they watched a seven-day battle in which the Chinese routed the Japs, who had transferred a full division to Burma to deal with Wingate's raiders. Then they crossed the Salween and later the Mekong, with guides supplied by the regular Chinese Army, and eventually reached Kunming. They had marched fifteen

hundred miles since leaving Imphal. The Chinese Commander-in-Chief at Kunming had been notified of their arrival and greeted them with flags flying and a band playing military marches. He gave them new clothes, hot baths, and haircuts all round, and lodged them in the best building in town. Their life became a round of sumptuous meals capped by a banquet that cost twenty thousand Chinese dollars. The hospitable Chinese General even advanced Gilkes enough money to pay his men. Eventually the column was flown back to India from Kunming in planes of the 10th U.S. Air Force.

After leaving the Brigadier, Major Scott's men marched due north in the direction of Fort Hertz. They bumped into a Japanese patrol, fought a sharp engagement, and pushed on to the Irrawaddy. They came out on to the river at a point between Katha and Bhamo, and lay for two days in the jungle by the bank watching Japanese patrol boats go by guarding all traffic. On the third morning a native boat, unescorted, ran aground in the mudbanks below where Scott's men were hiding. The raiders swarmed out, seized the boat, and crossed the river without interference. Two days later the mule carrying their wireless set, the only mule they had left, died. They wirelessly for a last supply-drop, then smashed the set and buried it.

The rendezvous for the dropping was a clearing near Bhamo, a large town one hundred and fifty miles behind the Japanese lines and not far from the China frontier. On the way to the rendezvous they ran out of rations. They dared not venture into the villages as the whole area was now heavily patrolled by the enemy. With nothing to eat but bamboo shoots and jungle palms, they began to drop like flies from hunger and disease.

Marching along through dark jungle shuttered from the sky with creepers, Major Scott noticed that the track ahead of him was growing lighter, as though he were nearing the end of a tunnel. Quite suddenly he was standing on the edge of the jungle, looking out on to what was probably the only large patch of grassland in Northern Burma. This was the rendezvous. Next day, with luck, the R.A.F. would drop them food and new equipment.

There remained the problem of the sick and wounded. Sheer guts had carried them this far, but Scott knew that not one of them could ever make the long trek to Blighty. There was Colonel Cooke, one of Wingate's senior officers, weakened with dysentery and covered with deep, festering jungle sores; Corporal Jimmy Walker, who had dropped out of line two days before with dysentery and an infected

for duty on the India-Burma front. Vlasto's radio operator, Sergeant Jack Reeves, hailed from Bradford, Ontario. There was no sounder man in the squadron. His mates called him "Happy." They'd never seen him smile. The flight rigger, Sergeant Charles Alfred May, was a mechanic in a garage in Leeds when Hitler invaded Poland. He had worked his way to India by way of the Libyan desert, but close contact with Stukas had not jarred his good humour.

The huge plane picked up fighter escort and stabbed into Burma, cruising easily at 160 m.p.h. "She's a hot crate," Vlasto thought. "But she can't be too hot for this job." Smoke fires pointed the way to the clearing. Vlasto dipped and spotted a white line across the field. Dropping low, he read the message: "Land on white line. Ground there V.G."

First the plane circled, releasing more supplies for the column. Then Vlasto skimmed the landing strip, weighing his chances. It was about eight hundred yards long—four hundred yards too short for comfort. A strong wind was blowing up the runway towards the tall teak forest, two hundred yards beyond where the white line ended. Vlasto knew that if anything went wrong, they'd be past needing boots. "What about it?" he asked the co-pilot. "Here's hoping," Murray said fervently. "Plane landing," Vlasto yelled to the crew, and they braced themselves in the rear. The big transport hit ground and touched down easily. Vlasto braked hard. They pulled up just at the end of the strip and taxied back slowly.

A band of hill-billy assassins tumbled out of the jungle and crowded happily around the plane. Mortar and Bren-gun crews remained at their posts. The Japs might attack any minute; it was a miracle they had not discovered the landing-ground days ago. The eighteen sick and wounded filed out from under cover and hobbled towards the plane. Some had to be supported, but they all wore their packs. For every one of them it was a reprieve from certain death. At the steps of the plane the eighteenth man halted and turned to Major Scott. "I'm all right, sir. I came in on my feet, and I'd like to go out the same way." Scott smiled. "Good man," he said, and No. 18 joined the group posing for a farewell picture. As the crew scrambled into the plane the Chindits waved their hats three times and cheered silently through closed lips.

The motors hummed and the door slammed to. Twelve minutes after landing the plane took off with seventeen walking hospital cases. She lifted slowly, labouring heavily. In the cockpit Vlasto

and Murray sat, dead white, with their eyes glued on the teak-trees rushing towards the wind-shield. The runway was too short and the plane overloaded. Sweat poured down their faces; they were heading straight into the top branches. Vlasto was listening for the crash when the plane heaved and bounced upward. A frantic lift and over she went. Tree-tops flashed below the wing-tips. Murray grinned at Vlasto: "Six inches to spare." Vlasto brushed the sweat off his forehead: "God bless No. 18."

Three weeks later No. 18 and the rest of Scott's column fought their way through to Fort Hertz and were flown back to India.

XVI. MULE FOR BREAKFAST

WHEN the columns commanded by Scott and Gilkes parted from Brigade Headquarters on the east bank of the Irrawaddy Jefferies' group remained with Wingate. On March 31, in a small jungle clearing ten miles east of the river, the Brigadier's force took a last supply-drop—eight days' hard rations per man for the hundred-and-fifty-mile homeward journey and paddles for the Irrawaddy crossing. For Jefferies there was a special item—a copy of his will, which he had deposited with his bank in India and had forgotten to sign. A bank official with a macabre sense of duty had sent him another copy for signature, thoughtfully suggesting that one of his fellow-officers could bring it back if anything happened to him.

Wingate now decided to break up the force remaining under him into small parties, each about forty strong. On the old military principle of "scatter to live," these groups were to fade into the jungle, cross the Irrawaddy at widely separated points, and make their way singly back to India. Before they dispersed Wingate ordered the whole of the force to fall in and gave the men a brief farewell talk. He explained what they had accomplished and summed up the situation in Burma, carefully pointing out Japanese-concentration points on the homeward route. He thanked them all for their conduct, and confessed that it was a hard blow not to be able to lead them back to India as a force. He made no bones about the trek to the Chindwin being the most difficult portion of the campaign. "Whatever you do," he counselled, "keep on the move. You'll be hungry and thirsty and tired. Don't get slack. Keep your

wits about you, and I'm sure you'll make it. Good luck to you all." The column split up, and each party struck off separately into the jungle to the east.

Wingate led his own group off in search of a safe bivouac, where they could rest and feed up for the return journey. He planned to lie low for a week to make the Japs believe they had cleared out of the area. The enemy, Wingate hoped, would eventually go hunting for them elsewhere, and leave them a clear passage across the Irrawaddy.

They soon came to a clearing by a dried-up *chaung* where, after some digging, they hit water and were able to drink, wash, and relax. After supper that night, resting in the bed of the *chaung*, Wingate sent for Jefferies and the Brigade-Major—Jim Anderson, a former Glasgow solicitor—and explained his plans for the withdrawal. He talked in a low murmur, running his fingers through his shaggy hair: "Every man's experience is invaluable, and my orders are to save as many as possible. The only way of doing that is to keep dodging the enemy. There are forty of us; if we're caught by a battalion or even by a company, we're done for. Speed is our only defence. Ergo—everything has to be sacrificed to speed. We'll have to kill the mules and eat them, scrap the wireless sets, and ditch the heavy equipment. That will mean no more supplies, no mortars, no machine-guns. We'll be foxes hunted every inch of the way. We're going to have to redouble our security measures. Every officer and man, irrespective of rank, will do his share of scouting, patrol work, and sentry duty. Anyone who is slack will be severely punished. See to it that it is understood by everyone in the force."

On April 1 Wingate sent off his final wireless messages to India. The batteries for the wireless sets were almost exhausted; there was just enough power left to pick up a broadcast from New Delhi. The wireless operator then handed round the last news bulletin they would see until they got back. The war news bucked them up considerably. The Russians had made spectacular gains on the southern part of the front. The Allied aerial offensive in western Europe was gaining momentum. In Yunnan Province the Chinese were pushing back the Japs, and Japanese positions in New Guinea were being hammered from the air. Cairo reported that the Axis was concentrating ships to evacuate its troops from North Africa. This last item meant that the sequel to the Wingate expedition might not be long deferred. The Mediterranean would soon be opened up to Allied shipping and there would be more supplies for the India front. Next year might see the big offensive in Burma.

After reading the news Wingate quoted: "As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country." (Proverbs xxv. 25.)

That same day the slaughter of the mules began. Wingate himself, acting as executioner, showed how to kill them without a tell-tale pistol shot. It was a grisly business. The first mule was dragged forward and given bamboo leaves to keep him quiet while a rope was tied around his front and back legs. Four men lifted the mule and threw him heavily to the ground. Then one man, stripped completely naked, sat on the animal's head to keep him still while Wingate deftly cut the carotid artery, explaining each detail of the operation like a surgeon lecturing to students. There was an appalling surge of blood. The naked man stood up—a monstrous figure drenched in blood from head to foot. Veterans of three years of war slipped off, nauseated, into the jungle.

The mule was immediately skinned and cut up, and portions were dealt out to each man. Chops and steaks were cut out of the carcass. They were tough and sweet, but gave the men new energy. The heart, liver, tongue, and kidneys made excellent eating, skewered on the end of a piece of bamboo and grilled over an open fire. Best of all was mule soup. That, in the opinion of Wingate's Yorkshiremen, was "really champion." For six days they ate mule for breakfast, mule for lunch, mule for dinner. On the seventh day they ate the horses.

The Brigadier enforced rigid security measures. Fires were lit only for half an hour before dawn and half an hour after dusk because smoke, hanging over the tree-tops, might give them away in the daylight, whereas flames could be seen for only a short distance through the jungle and could be extinguished in a few seconds. Wingate instructed the men who were chopping bamboo for more paddles to disguise what they were doing by breaking up the regularity of their strokes, which echoed through the jungle. He taught them to give one mighty wallop, then a lot of quick strokes, then to stop. It was a slow and tedious business. To keep the mules quiet while they were waiting their turn for slaughter, Wingate saw to it that they had bamboo leaves to chew on all day long, and ordered an enormous supply of leaves to be piled up every morning.

One mule leader begged to have three of his pets spared. He promised they would give no trouble and swore that he could bring them out alive. The Brigadier explained patiently that even one mule would endanger the whole party. With a mournful "Very good, sahib," the muleteer padded away to join his animals, who were to

be killed the next morning. All night he talked to them, caressed their heads, and prayed in a low monotone. At dawn he vanished into the jungle until it was all over. Afterwards he wept for three days.

Wingate's men did not dare to move out of the bivouac area—they might at any moment be discovered and attacked—and the seven-day rest period dragged by painfully slowly. There was not much to do except day-dream, and the fact they were now heading for home brought back thoughts banished during the months of training and action. The colour of the teak leaves reminded Jefferies of a green-jacket his best girl had worn in London. A noise in the jungle recalled the sound of a well-hit tennis ball. He would fall asleep dreaming of peace-time England, and wake up with the unbearable stench of dead mule in his nostrils.

Lying in the *chaung* bed, the officers rested, dozing, reading, or listening to Wingate talking. With the most dangerous part of the campaign still ahead, Wingate was incapable of relaxing. In those seven days he talked like a man possessed, rather as if he were striving to set in order the sum-total of his beliefs. The survivors in the party remembered fragments of what he said, but none could recapture the flavour of his language. Wingate talked of books, painting, music, and the future of mankind. He lectured them on the painting of the eighteenth century. He argued heatedly with Jefferies that the symphony and not—as Jefferies held—the piano concerto was the highest form of art. There were great possibilities in the cinema, he said, but they had never been fully exploited, except perhaps by Walt Disney, for whom he had a great admiration. He analysed the art of detective fiction, quoted Leonardo da Vinci, and recited in a whisper Gray's *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*—one of his favourite poems. He talked a great deal about the good in various religions. He dissected the characters in the comic strips. His favourites were "Jane," of the *Daily Mirror*, and J. Wellington Wimpy, whose lack of courage, Wingate argued, was more human than Popeye's impossible feats of bravery. He would make whimsical plans of what he was going to do after the war. He had become very fond of the Burmese, and one day remarked, "I've half a mind to settle down here when it's all over." Next day he was talking of retiring to an oyster farm on the East Coast.

Only once did Wingate bring up the subject of war. "A really good commander," he said, "leaves nothing to chance. But you

can't completely rule out the element of luck in war-time. If a general is consistently unlucky, however good a general he may be, there's only one thing to do: sack him."

Wingate talked a great deal about a league of nations, plans for a world federation, and the future of the world. A way would have to be found, he declared, to restore the white man's individuality and powers of initiative. "European civilization," he declared, "prevents men from thinking and acting for themselves. Civilized man is like a white ant in a mound; he is entirely dependent on a complex social organization." Then he discussed ways and means of enforcing the peace: "This time, a league of nations or some federation of nations must be made to work. Any nation which breaks the law must be dealt with immediately."

Between bouts of talking Wingate would bury his head in a book. He had brought with him Xenophon, Plato's *Dialogues*, Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad*, and a *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*. When he spotted the life of Bernard Shaw that had been parachuted to Jefferies a few days before, he asked if he could borrow it. "Most English writers are sterile," he complained to Jefferies. "There is virtually nobody writing today of any importance—except Shaw and Wells."

The Brigadier's vitality was quite a trial to his officers, who were completely exhausted and wanted to make the most of their seven days of rest. At night Wingate would call softly to Jefferies, and, if he was awake, confront him with some philosophical question. That usually led to a discussion which went on until Wingate was satisfied that the problem had been thoroughly polished off. One morning the Brigadier sent a man to tell Jefferies to join him in a hurry. When he saw the Major doubling over, he put a finger to his lips and hissed "Quiet." Jefferies concluded they were in trouble. He found Wingate staring enraptured at an exquisitely coloured butterfly.

On April 7 Wingate decided to make a second try at crossing the Irrawaddy. If all went well the homeward march would take fourteen days; his party now had five days' paratroop rations apiece. Wingate jotted down in his notebook exactly what he would eat at each meal. On the way back he kept on consulting this notebook, and would remark aloud: "Now I can have some chocolate . . . time for two biscuits."

Before leaving the bivouac the men smashed and buried the

wireless sets, mortars, and machine-guns, keeping Tommy-guns, rifles, and grenades. From now on all equipment would have to be manhandled every foot of the way. Smashing the wireless sets was the hardest blow of all. It gave the men a ghastly feeling to stand by watching the R.A.F. sergeant wrecking their last link with the outside world.

They marched rapidly to the Irrawaddy, coming out on to the stream between Tigyaing and Tagaung, twenty-five miles south of where they had first attempted to cross. Every boat in sight had been wrecked by the Japanese. Wingate's men collected three of them and worked all day to make them floatable. The Japs had been too thorough. The Chindits went back into the jungle, lay low for twenty-four hours, and the following night tried crossing at another place. This time there were no boats at all, and Wingate, through his field glasses, spotted Japs on the west bank. Again they marched back into the jungle, tired and in very low spirits. It began to look as if they would never get across. They spent that night and the following morning in a sort of petrified forest of small stunted trees that provided no shelter from the heat, and mulled over ways and means of getting back. Just before noon a patrol at last found a heavy dugout on a lake near the Irrawaddy. They quickly carried it down to the river. Wingate, Jefferies, and Anderson ran their field glasses very carefully up and down the opposite bank. There were no Japs in sight.

Eight men had crossed in the dugout when, to everyone's amazement, the Chindits saw a boat heading upstream. Wingate hailed it, and it pulled in to the shore. The boatman, a Burmese peasant, explained that the Japs had allowed him on the river because he was moving a corpse that had died of dysentery. He then slyly lifted the floorboards and disclosed, under the corpse, a cargo of tomatoes and salt. The corpse smelled very high, but Wingate cheerfully bought and divided up the tomatoes. He was in no position to be particular. More silver rupees changed hands and the boatman was persuaded to dump the corpse and the salt and ferry them across.

Three-quarters of the party had safely reached the west bank when a Japanese patrol spotted the boat heading eastward to collect the remainder, and opened fire. The boatman paddled off at top speed upstream, and the nine men on the east bank faded into the jungle. Later, Wingate learned, the boatman calmly returned to pick up his corpse and cargo of salt, and ferried the nine remaining men across. Five of them eventually got back alive.

Wingate's force was now on the island on which Calvert's column had fought a battle with the Japs on the way in. Jefferies felt that the worst was behind them and remarked jubilantly to Wingate: "I can just see myself sitting down to a bottle of champagne in Calcutta."

This remark enraged the Brigadier. "You'd better realize, John," he said angrily, "that the rest of this trip is going to be no picnic. You'd be much wiser to concentrate on getting out of Burma alive. In any case, your stomach won't be able to stand up to that sort of thing."

At this point villagers informed them that the Japanese were in great strength three miles to the north.

After crossing the channel between the island and the mainland Wingate's men set off along a rough jungle track pitted with great holes five or six feet deep. They had not gone very far when Wingate saw a burning torch coming towards them. It was no more than thirty yards away. In a flash they dived into fire positions at the side of the track and waited tensely. The ghostly torch crept forward unbearably slowly. It turned out to be a party of natives. Those Burmese had no idea how near they came to being riddled with bullets. Every one of Wingate's men had taken first pressure on his rifle.

The Chindits re-formed and moved off along the jungle track. They could find no water and eventually bivouacked in dry jungle by the side of the trail. It was a ghastly night. The rainy season was approaching, and clouds of mosquitoes made sleep impossible. Most of the men had by now lost their mosquito veils, and Wingate had given orders that anti-mosquito cream must be used only to grease their rifles—they had run out of rifle oil. Jefferies managed to keep off the mosquitoes for an hour or so by smoking four very strong Burmese cigarettes which the boatman with the corpse had given him during the Irrawaddy crossing.

At dawn they pushed off again, leaving the beaten track and hacking a path through the jungle. Another two days' march brought them to the next great hazard—the railway. By now it was heavily patrolled. The Japs had planted troops in every station and every bridge and culvert was closely guarded. Wingate's men approached the line through teak forest thickly carpeted with fallen leaves, which made a loud crackling sound under their feet. After dark the Brigadier carried out a test to see how far away they could be heard. The result was discouraging. The crackling of the leaves could be

picked up three hundred yards away. Next he tried to advance with one man leading the way on his hands and knees, clearing a path through the leaves. This proved hopelessly slow. Wingate decided to trust to luck.

Thick jungle extended to within ten yards of the railway on either side. Scouts reported that the Japs were stationed four hundred yards to their right and to their left. Somehow they would have to cover twenty yards of open ground across the railway without being spotted. Fortunately the teak leaves petered out a hundred yards from the line and the going became noiseless underfoot. At the edge of the jungle they halted. Again it was like getting set to go over the top. The railway was the second critical lap in the withdrawal. Beyond it lay one more river—the Chindwin—then home. Wingate whispered softly: "Here we go." Bunched closely together they stole swiftly across the gap and disappeared into the jungle on the other side. The railway was behind them.

The Brigadier urged them forward at top speed, and did not say a word until they had put five miles between themselves and the line. Then he halted for a breather.

"Well, we can thank the Japanese for something," he remarked to Jefferies. "That was disgustingly bad patrol work. We should never have got through."

Wingate was quick to check any tendency towards wishful thinking. Jefferies had acquired an inexplicable craving for mince pies, and had been amusing himself by debating the wording of the telegram he would send to Firpos in Calcutta when he got back.

"I'm going to order exactly six dozen," he now confided to Wingate, "and have them sent up to me somewhere in the hills. If the first lot are really good, I'll order some more. I mean to have mince pies at breakfast, lunch, and dinner." Wingate cut him short.

"We're still a long way from Firpos," he said severely, "and crossing the Chindwin is going to be the toughest hurdle of all."

XVII. "ONE MORE RIVER"

THE Chindits now marched for several days through the Mingin mountains between the railway and the escarpment. At one point they had to make ropes of their rifle slings to get down a twenty-foot drop. They were so tired they stumbled over stones

and boulders, and most of them were badly bruised. Their boots were in a shocking condition, cracked by the scorching sun and torn to shreds by sharp rocks. The only respite from mosquitoes was when they could lie beside the smoke of a camp-fire. Yet somehow their sense of humour came to the rescue at the hardest moments. One sweltering morning Wingate was leading the way up an almost perpendicular rock face strewn with loose boulders. It was a back-breaking climb, and the party was hungry, thirsty, and dead-beat. One man accidentally dislodged a large stone which hit the man behind him right in the face. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" said the angry victim. "Looking for edelweiss, you bloody fool," a voice called back cheerily. "And I mean to get the first one."

By now all of their paratroop rations were exhausted, and they had nothing left but rice. The Burma Rifles picked jungle roots, which they chewed or made into soup. One of the roots had a delicious flavour, a cross between chicken and mushrooms, but it was poor stuff to march on. Two of the British troopers killed and ate a scavenging hawk. All of them ate snakes. Pythons were best. Cut up into steaks and grilled, they tasted rather like fish. When there was no time for cooking they picnicked off strips of python hastily dipped in the camp-fire. Banana leaves, when they could find them, made a good dessert. They had run out of cigarettes and made their own out of coarse native tobacco wrapped in the leaves of the books they had brought with them. Even matches had become very precious; they were needed to light fires to cook the rice, and their small supply would have to last Wingate's men until they crossed the Chindwin. The officers carried the few remaining boxes in waterproof anti-gas wallets.

Diarrhœa, dysentery, and jungle sores began to take a heavy toll. There was one British lance-corporal whose legs were infected with deep, septic jungle sores. Several times Wingate had halted to do what he could for the man. The lance-corporal decided he would not slow up the column any longer. He casually told the man in front of them that he was slipping out of line—it was only diarrhœa, he said—and he would catch up with them later. When Wingate heard what had happened he went back to look for the lance-corporal. They never found him.

Every man was haunted with the fear of falling sick; the slightest suspicion of diarrhœa or dysentery produced secret panic. Usually the sick just crumpled up in their tracks, and there was the grim

business of making them as comfortable as possible and leaving them behind to die. One British lieutenant, a signal officer and a key man, worn out with dysentery, just couldn't march another step and dropped to the side of the track muttering: "Well, I've had it." Wingate halted and talked to him gently for four or five minutes. When he turned to go, the lieutenant rose shakily to his feet and saluted with a cheery smile. He might have been saying good-bye to his girl-friend at the Savoy on the eve of a big "do." Then he lay down at the foot of a tall teak-tree, and the dust settled over him as the column marched on.

The Chindits had set out strong, hearty, well-muscled. Now, with a few exceptions, their bodies were a shocking sight. Muscles had become stringy tendons; arms and legs were as emaciated as a Hindu ascetic's; stomachs caved inward; ribs stuck out above horrible cavities. In some cases starvation had affected speech and hearing; two or three of the men were unable to articulate properly or grasp orders. All were so exhausted that every time they lay down to sleep they felt they would never have the energy to get up again, and had to fight down the dangerous thought of how pleasant it would be just to lie here and give in. Wingate himself miraculously showed no physical signs of fatigue. He drove his men on with a cold, unrelenting ferocity—and probably saved half of them from throwing in the sponge. He gave orders that no one was to drop out of line, even for diarrhoea. By doing so they slowed down the whole column and weakened their own will to carry on. "Don't worry about your trousers," he told them. "Just keep marching."

The ability to go on marching was not so much a question of toughness and wind as of mental outlook. At this stage they kept going only by sheer will-power and faith in Wingate. All the way back, conscious only of hunger, thirst, and overpowering fatigue, the men repeated to themselves the slogan that had carried them confidently into Burma: "The Brigadier will pull us through."

Wingate watched over his men like a guardian angel. At dawn, before anyone else was awake, he would pad silently off into the jungle on a solitary scouting patrol. On the march he led the way himself. Knowing that their only security lay in speed, he set a merciless pace and would keep looking back over his shoulder to see that every man was in line. They marched in single file, and if anyone lagged a few yards behind the man in front of him Wingate would growl: "Keep closed up. Keep closed up." Lack of water was their worst hardship, and he allowed the men to drink from

their water-bottles only when ordered or after obtaining his permission. One morning the party passed an enormous lime-tree, heavy with ripe fruit. For days they had had nothing to drink but a few mouthfuls of water drained out of hollow bamboos. Wingate refused to call a halt. Next day friendly natives told them that the Japs had been combing the jungle less than a mile from the lime-tree.

At the top of a ridge on the west side of the Mingin Range Wingate's men heard the sound of British planes bombing Pinlebu in the Mu valley below them. They were so weak from hunger that the Brigadier decided to risk lighting big marker fires to attract the attention of the planes, and with the white backs of their maps they spelled out a recognition signal. The pilots failed to spot them.

The next dangerous stretch was a twenty-mile strip in the Mu river valley between Pinbon and Pinlebu, two main Japanese garrison villages connected by a motor road. On the march in Major Bromhead's column had been sent to engage the Japs at Pinbon, and Scott's men had tackled the garrison at Pinlebu. Now Wingate's small force had to slip through unnoticed. Luck was with them. They crossed the valley at night unobserved, and reached the foot of the escarpment without incident.

Before them rose a sheer wall of rock fifteen hundred feet high. There were few tracks across it, and it was probable that the Japs would be patrolling all of them. The need for food had now become desperate, and Wingate decided to venture into a village to buy some. All that the villagers had for sale were papayas. As they were leaving a small Burmese came running after them and offered to guide them over a little-known track across the escarpment. He also brought depressing news: the British patrols which Wingate was expecting to meet up with on the east bank of the Chindwin had recrossed the river some days before and the Japs were combing the countryside for Wingate's party. But Buddha, he announced solemnly, had sent him to save them from destruction. Wingate hesitated. It was quite possible that not Buddha but the Japanese had sent him—to lead them into a trap. But the situation called for desperate risks, and the little Burmese, with his dirty white *longyi*, cadaverous body, and pinched ascetic face did look like one of Buddha's disciples. The Brigadier decided to take a chance.

Their tiny guide led them over the escarpment in half the time they had expected. At noon on April 23 with his men gathered round him Wingate—holding in his hand a long bamboo st—

stood on the crest of a ridge like Moses on Mount Nebo, and pointed to the Chindwin valley below bathed in a lovely blue haze. "This is our last lap," he said. "There in that blue mist lies Jordan, and beyond it the Promised Land."

The march to the river was the worst part of the whole campaign. For the first eight miles they waded waist-deep in water along a fast-flowing *chaung*, stumbling painfully against sharp rocks and repeatedly sinking up to their necks in deep holes on the bed of the *chaung*. It took them three days to cover the short stretch to the river, and there the situation was even blacker than their Burmese guide had indicated. One by one Wingate's scouts came back with grim reports that every village and likely crossing-place was occupied by the enemy. Two or three weeks before the British had sent strong patrols over on to the east bank, but these had fallen back. All boats had been commandeered by the Japs. However, Buddha's messenger miraculously reappeared with a friend. He volunteered to buy food from the villagers and said that he knew where boats were to be found. Wingate, having trusted the man so far, decided he must trust him all the way. A few hours later the Burmese returned with rice and vegetables. He also brought alarming news: the Japs knew that Wingate's party was in the vicinity. Then he went on to describe very precisely the area which the enemy had combed the day before.

The strain was now becoming unbearable. When the Chindits left Imphal each man had mentally signed away his life, and during the campaign there had been no time to think beyond the next meal. But now they were within sight of home; on the other side of the Chindwin were the British lines—and safety. One thought was in every man's mind: "It would be dirty luck to get pipped on the post."

Wingate decided that the safest course would be to make for the river, advancing through the area patrolled by the Japs the day before. The two courageous Burmese guides went off in search of boats. Wingate's men never saw them again; they must have been captured and killed by the Japanese.

The Chindits marched and counter-marched until dusk, laboriously covering up their tracks. That night they bivouacked in thick jungle, deliberately avoiding water for fear of an ambush. No one could sleep, and the Brigadier read Plato to them in a whisper by the light of the moon. Just before dawn Wingate closed the book wearily and muttered to Jefferies: "Most soothing."

Again Wingate and his officers pored over maps, and finally charted a course which would bring them on to the river at a point where British patrols were reported to be stationed on the west bank. There was considerable danger that they would be fired on by their own side, but they would have to trust to their recognition signals. They had not gone far along the planned course when they came to the worst tract of elephant grass they had encountered in Burma. The blades were stiff and sharp—more like wire than grass—and rose to a height of fifteen feet. At the bottom they were inextricably tangled and matted together. The Chindits tried for three hours that night to push through the elephant grass, but made virtually no headway. Reluctantly Wingate altered his plans, pulled back into the jungle, and the party flopped down utterly exhausted.

Wingate did not sleep. He paced noiselessly up and down, his head sunk forward, his hands clasped behind his back, thinking over every possible way of making the crossing. By dawn he had worked out a new plan. He himself and the four best swimmers would swim the river, contact the British on the west bank, and send out a patrol with boats to bring the rest of the party across. He fixed a rendezvous on the west bank, and agreed upon recognition signals. Then he picked four men to go with him—Major Jefferies, Captain Aung Thin, an R.A.F. wireless-operator (Sergeant Wilshaw), and Private Boardman. The remaining senior officer, Major Jim Anderson, was to take the rest of the party back into the jungle and lie low until nightfall.

At 5.30 A.M. Wingate's party of five pushed off. They examined the nearest jungle track, and found it heavily marked with Japanese footprints. This left them then the choice of two alternatives: to march boldly down the track, which might lead them straight into a Japanese ambush; to make a superhuman effort to fight their way through the elephant grass.

Wingate said to Jefferies: "Well, John, which shall it be?"

"We have a fifty-fifty chance on the track," Jefferies replied.

"In the elephant grass we're sure of evading the Japs. I don't know if we can get through it; it'll be damned hard work. But I think it's worth trying." Wingate nodded.

"Come on," he said. "We'll tear it apart blade by blade."

That was exactly what they did. It was a pitched battle—man versus jungle. Marching in single file, they took turns at leading. sharp-edged elephant grass had to be forced aside or bent

with bare hands. Within a few minutes blood was trickling from the palms of their hands and from long scratches on their arms and foreheads. Their shirts were in ribbons. Wingate fought the jungle like a man possessed, magically conjuring up hidden reserves of energy. He led the way longer than anyone else, and when he was not leading he carried the rifle of the man out in front.

After four hours of marching, they had covered no more than five hundred yards. Wingate decided to halt for a few mouthfuls of rice. They found a buffalo track leading down to a swamp, and out of the stinking black slime squeezed enough moisture to cook their rice. They took care to use very dry tinder and waved their hats over the flame to disperse the smoke.

After eating they battered their way through another appalling stretch. Now it was a nightmarish game they were playing: each blade of elephant grass was a Jap that had to be grabbed by the throat, shaken and bent and pummelled and trampled under foot. Bleeding, sweating, panting, cursing, they pushed forward, yard by yard.

According to the map the elephant grass ended several hundred yards short of the river, and a track—which the Japs would surely be patrolling—led down to the Chindwin. Wingate, who was leading, suddenly let out a grunt of surprise. "Take a look at this, John," he whispered to Jefferies, who was marching just behind him. Jefferies squeezed forward beside the Brigadier. There, almost at their feet, lay the Chindwin. Mercifully the map-maker had slipped. No track. No Japs.

It was 3 P.M. Wingate made another of his lightning decisions. "We won't wait until dusk," he said. "We'll swim the river now. In thirty minutes we can be behind our own lines." His words braced the men, exhausted as they were, for a last spurt. They cut their slacks into shorts, took off their boots and tied them to their packs, and discarded their heavy equipment. Their rifles they kept. It was a point of honour to get back with pack and rifle, if it was humanly possible.

Wingate turned to them and said: "As soon as we come out on to the bank, we may expect to be fired upon. There must be no hesitation. When I give the word, run down the bank. Don't fight the current. When you get to the other side, take cover. Is every one ready?" The men nodded. "Good luck," said the Brigadier. "This is our last obstacle."

Wingate bent low and doubled down the bank into the stream

with Jefferies, Aung Thin, Wilshaw, and Boardman at his heels. After swimming thirty or forty yards Jefferies was forced to let go of his rifle and boots. About one hundred yards from the bank the tattered shreds of his shirt sleeves wound themselves tightly around his arms and completely imprisoned them. He kicked out furiously with his legs and drifted slowly into mid-stream. Then a small wave hit him in the face and he swallowed several mouthfuls of muddy water. He began to sink. Desperately he twisted round to look for help. Several hundred yards downstream Wilshaw was floating along cosily in a Mae West jacket which he had lugged through the whole of the campaign. Wingate appeared to be in difficulties himself. Far behind Boardman was helping Aung Thin, who had hurt his knee rather badly in a rocky *chaung* a week before. None of them could possibly come to his rescue. It seemed silly to give up and die a few hundred yards from the post. The idea of dying at this point enraged him. He kicked out savagely again and forged ahead slowly towards the bank. Then he began to lose consciousness. His legs stiffened and the kicks grew feebler. The rage was all gone. He felt only an enormous weariness and thought to himself: "Oh, well, at least it's going to be a pleasant way of dying." Just then his feet touched bottom.

He stumbled in a daze through the shallow water and collapsed on the beach. A few minutes later Wingate was shaking him by the shoulder. "Come on. The Japs may be here. Run to cover." Jefferies struggled to his feet and lazily watched the Brigadier doubling up the beach in his bare feet. Wingate had gone about eighty yards when he let out a fiendish yell, spun round, and sprinted back into the water. Wilshaw, Aung Thin, and Boardman, who were still in the river, thought that this was the end: Japs on the west bank! Jefferies alone realized what was the matter. The red-hot sand had roasted the soles of the Brigadier's bare feet.

Wingate whipped off his shorts and wound them around his feet, bedouin-style. Then, crowned with the old pith helmet which he had worn throughout the campaign, he started hobbling up the beach to look for the British, clad only in a tattered bush shirt, its tails flapping in the breeze.

Near the bank Wingate's party found a small cultivator's hut. The owner gave them cheroots and pints of the juice of green coconuts, and offered to guide them to the nearest British front-line post, five miles away. It was the first time for many months that they had

been able to relax. Wingate shook hands with each man. For weeks they had been dreaming of this moment. They were too played out to say a word.

Two hours later five scarecrows, barefooted, heavily bearded, wearing foul-smelling rags, and (except for the Brigadier) enormous coolie hats, stumbled into a tidy little jungle outpost where a group of spruce-looking British officers were sitting on ration tins around a trestle-table drinking tea. The officer in charge, Major White, sat the Chindits down and gave them hot, sweet tea with condensed milk, a bully beef stew, rum, and cigarettes. With the tension gone, dead weariness set in. Starved as they were, it was an effort to eat and to lift a mug of tea. Major White meanwhile had arranged for a patrol to cross the Chindwin with enough boats to pick up Major Anderson and the rest of Wingate's party. When the patrol was ready Wingate stood up and said quietly: "I'm going along with them." It was a five-mile march to the Chindwin and he had just marched fully two hundred. Jefferies, Aung Thin, and the others feebly volunteered to go with him. "There's no need for that," said Wingate. "You stay here." Gratefully they stretched out on blankets in the corner of the hut and the next moment were asleep.

Wingate trekked to the river and settled down at the rendezvous to wait for a signal from Major Anderson's party. He waited all night. No signal came.

After the Brigadier's group of five had pushed off at dawn to swim the Chindwin, Anderson's scouts brought word that they had seen Japanese patrols nearby, hunting for their tracks. Anderson's party marched and counter-marched all day to give the enemy the slip, and at night went down to the river to contact the British on the west bank. They did not know whether or not Wingate's group had got across alive. To make matters worse, they were obliged to choose a crossing-point a mile south of the rendezvous as the Japs were patrolling the bank higher up.

At this stage they had no torches and fell back on a primitive method of signalling. They lined a large native cooking-pot with white paper and held a lighted match inside it; by moving a bush hat over and then away from the flame they managed to spell out shakily a message in crude dots and dashes. That message Wingate, waiting on the west bank a mile to the north, failed to detect. Anderson's men, worn out and downhearted, pulled back into the jungle.

MAJOR JOHN B. JEFFERIES,
WITH BURMESE COOLIE
HAT AND KUKRI



MAJOR BERNARD FERGUS-
SON, WHOSE COLUMN
BLEW UP THE BONCHAUNG
GORGE BRIDGE



AFTER THE AGONISING UNCERTAINTY OF THE TAKE-OFF (SEE PAGES 98-99) THE RESCUED MEN SETTLE DOWN INSIDE THE AIRCRAFT. THE FLIGHT RIGGER PASSES ROUND A GERMAN WATER CAN—A SOUVENIR FROM THE WESTERN DESERT. THE MAN TAKING IT IS SUFFERING FROM DYSENTERY AND AN INFECTED HIP. HE STEADIES HIMSELF BY HOLDING THE STATIC LINE TO WHICH THE PARACHUTE HOOKS ARE FASTENED

The next morning Captain Motilal Katju volunteered to venture into a native village to look for boats. In peace-time Katju had edited a newspaper in India. He had won a fine Military Cross for gallantry in Libya, and was accompanying the expedition as official observer. For several days he had had a premonition that he would not get out alive, and had asked Jefferies to carry his diary, which contained a day-by-day account of the campaign. To cheer him up Jefferies had lightly replied, "Nonsense. We all get to feeling that way," and had refused to take the diary. Katju never returned from that last patrol.

In the course of the day five of Anderson's men tried to swim the Chindwin. One was drowned but the others made it. They eventually found Wingate and Major White's party—now joined by Jefferies, Aung Thin, Wilshaw, and Boardman—and gave the Brigadier a message from Anderson fixing a new rendezvous for the crossing that night.

At dusk Wingate and the others moved to the rendezvous. As the time for Anderson's signal drew near Wingate glanced at his watch. Just then they heard the sound of a Japanese patrol pushing through the elephant grass on the east bank. A moment later Anderson's signal flickered across the river.

Wingate's torch flashed an answer, and Major White's party shot down into the boats. The Japs opened up with a mortar, but White got across safely. Anderson's men piled swiftly into the boats, and the tiny flotilla started back. When they were in mid-stream the Japanese mortar again went into action, but its fire was very wide of the mark. From the west bank a familiar sound welcomed them home—the sharp, sustained rattle of Bren-guns raking the enemy on the east bank. Then the mortar was silent. Out of the shadows a bearded figure in an old pith helmet rose from the sandbanks to greet them. It was Wingate, waiting on the edge of the river he had called "Jordan" to lead them back into the Promised Land.

XVIII. "BACK TO BLIGHTY"

WINGATE guided the party up to the forward post, where trestle-tables had been laid out, candles lit, and a feast prepared for them. There were large bowls of fruit, and cans of rich, sweet, condensed milk, for which every man had longed for weeks, there

was tea, chocolate, digestive biscuits, and rum. For the first time in three months the Chindits slept with the certainty of living to see the sun rise. Next day they were too exhausted to move on, and rested for forty-eight hours at the forward post. Then they marched over the mountains to rear headquarters, where a tremendous reception awaited them. Here they were deloused, given new clothes, and a doctor treated their cuts and sores. Most of them were completely lame and had to be mounted on horses or riding-mules for the last hard stretch to Imphal.

At Imphal all the returning men were promptly pushed into hospital. They had lost an average of fifteen pounds apiece. The doctor in charge explained that their stomachs had shrunk to half their normal size and prescribed a liquid diet. No mince pies. No eggs and bacon. However, the matron, Miss Agnes McGeary, was a charitable soul—she had, incidentally, won a medal for gallantry at Dunkirk—and took pity on the Chindits. In a very few days she had worked them on to a more robust diet. There was porridge and cream for breakfast; chicken in cream or roast beef, vegetables and fruit for lunch and dinner; chocolate and malted milk between meals—and a bottle of beer a day per man, an unheard-of luxury in the mountains of Assam, where the ration was three bottles a month. The Corps Commander had seen to it that Wingate's men received any special items they requested. It was all very good for the spirit, but the flesh was still weak, and most of the Chindits were tortured with stomachache. Throughout the homeward march Flight-Lieutenant Thompson had dreamed of sweet, creamy, condensed milk. In hospital he wangled two cans from a nurse and drank them down one after the other. He was sick for three weeks.

Wingate's men stayed several weeks in hospital, where they were visited by the Viceroy. All of them received anti-malaria treatment, but the mosquitoes in the Chindwin belt had done a thorough job. Eighty per cent of the expedition developed severe malaria. Before the Chindits left hospital there was a rush to be photographed with their beards, which had to be shaved off before they reached New Delhi; no one in the British Army is allowed to wear a beard without the King's consent, and only a few members of the Pioneer Corps have actually got it. Wingate insisted that every man in the expedition should be given five weeks' leave, and saw to it that they were allotted the best leave stations in India. He himself planned to go to the Himalayas—to Naini Tal, where he was born.

News of the expedition continued to remain a closely guarded secret. Groups of ten to twenty were still trickling into Imphal daily. Every morning Wingate and his officers checked over the previous day's list of survivors and newly reported casualties. All the column commanders had got out of Burma alive, though theirs was one of the most dangerous jobs. Lieutenant-Colonel Wheeler had been killed by a stray bullet when his Burma Rifles stormed a Japanese outpost near the Shweli river. Another of the three colonels in the force was reported missing.

On a campaign of this kind the casualties were, inevitably, heavy enough to make the survivors feel they were lucky to have pulled through. Even so they were considerably lower than Wingate had expected. The number of men lost during the march into Burma, when the columns were operating as fighting units, was astonishingly small. Major Calvert's column, for instance, had lost only 6 per cent of its men when it received the order to withdraw. The bulk of the casualties occurred on the homeward march, after the Chindits had abandoned their wireless sets and were cut off from supplies. Sickness and exhaustion took a far heavier toll than the Japs. Some groups lost nearly half of their men on the way back. One haggard survivor told how he and a party of twenty had found themselves ten days' march from the Chindwin with only two pounds of rice and two pounds of buffalo meat. When they reached the mountains before the river they began to drop, one by one, utterly exhausted. He alone had lived to swim the Chindwin. Two parties were never heard from again. However, several groups such as Flight-Lieutenant Thompson's came off very lightly. Considering the nature of the campaign and the results achieved, Wingate accomplished his long-range penetration at a relatively low cost in men and equipment.

At Imphal the column commanders had the painful task of drawing up lists of the men believed taken prisoner. One major headed his report: "Prisoners—presumed killed." Some days later a headquarters official wrote back, acidly pointing out that there was no such designation in military terminology. The major penned a six-word reply: "Sir, we are fighting *the Japanese*."

News of Wingate's raid was released for the first time on May 21. A correspondent who went to interview Wingate in New Delhi found him pacing up and down his room, stripped except for a pair of shorts, dictating his campaign report and pausing every

now and then to sniff an orchid. "If there's anything more strenuous than leading an expedition behind enemy lines," the Brigadier remarked, "it is writing a report on it." He was asked if the campaign had gone according to plan. "In war," Wingate answered, "nothing ever goes according to plan—not in this kind of war. A campaign may be planned meticulously, yet there will be changes as fighting progresses. All you can do is allow for the changes when you make your plans. I am quite satisfied with the results. The expedition was a complete success."

That night Wingate, Thompson, and Lockett met in Maiden's Hotel to celebrate. Wingate turned up in his old bush shirt and famous topee. He had been laid up with dysentery and malaria, and showed signs of severe strain. After dinner some one miraculously produced a bottle of French brandy, and toasts were drunk far into the night. All the evening not a word was said about the campaign. But as they rose to go Wingate proposed a toast. "Here's to the next time," he said. "Next time we cross the Chindwin, the way home will be through Rangoon."

When Wingate's men returned to Imphal everyone of them had marched more than one thousand miles. They had lived for more than two months in the heart of enemy territory with the air and the ether as their only contact with the outside world. They had endured appalling hardships. Every minute of the campaign they knew that an infuriated enemy, more than ten times their strength, was combing the jungle for this band of raiders that had insolently invaded the backyard of Japan's "co-prosperity" sphere. Behind the colour and drama of their exploits lay a record of solid military achievement.

The Wingate expedition relieved the heavy pressure on the Chinese to the east, pried loose the Japanese grip on the Kachin Levies in the north-eastern corner of Burma, and staved off a threatened invasion of India. It demonstrated the growing strength and cunning of the Allies on the ground and their supremacy in the air, and brought many Burmese round to belief in an Allied victory. It raised bands of Burmese patriots to fight with the Allies. It inflicted upon the proud Japanese a shocking loss of face in the eyes of the native population. The Japs appear to have overstayed their welcome in Burma; after two years of Japanese intimidation the natives—at least in the north—are asking "the Government" to rid them of their slave-driving masters. They do not want Japan's "co-prosperity." They want "salt, cloth, and doctors." If approach

ed with tact and understanding, as Wingate approached them, they seem to be ready to co-operate with an invading Allied army in the same way as they assisted the Chindits.

Wingate's raiders penetrated to within less than one hundred miles of the Burma Road, carried out certain vital "jobs" east of the Irrawaddy that remain for the time being a military secret, and destroyed the Japanese feeling of security throughout Burma. They provided R.A.F. bases in India with information which led to a series of highly successful raids on Japanese troop concentrations, and themselves inflicted several thousand casualties on the enemy. The Japanese communications system in Northern Burma was thoroughly messed up, thereby disorganizing the whole of the Japanese occupation. The havoc wrought over ten thousand square miles of enemy territory kept the Japs tied down to repair work throughout the summer and autumn months, and enabled the Allies in India to build up their striking power without interference.

More importantly, perhaps, the Wingate expedition demonstrated several things which undoubtedly have had a decisive influence on the planning and preparation of large-scale offensive action in Burma. It provided the R.A.F. and the ground forces with unique experience in land-air co-operation far behind enemy lines. It proved conclusively that a large force could operate indefinitely in enemy territory without orthodox lines of communication, and that, given complete air superiority, a whole army could be supplied from the air. The Transport Squadron flew fifty thousand miles by day and night, with and without fighter escort, and delivered by parachute well over half a million pounds of supplies to constantly moving troops in dense jungle. It did not miss a single rendezvous, and did not suffer a single casualty to aircraft or personnel. The Allies ruled the skies over Burma. The only Japanese aircraft Wingate's men saw throughout the entire campaign were a few old reconnaissance planes.

The expedition brought back a rich haul of military information which will save thousands of lives when next the Allies fight in Burma. Most of this information remains secret, but Wingate's officers did have something to say about the use and quality of Jap weapons. "The rifles used by the Japanese troops occupying Burma," Major Jefferies reported,

were of small calibre, and did not do a great deal of damage unless they hit a bone or a vital part of the body. Their automatic weapons had a rather slow rate of fire. The Japs were very fond of the mortar, but their marksmanship was generally inaccurate.

Our experience disproved the belief that the Japs happily launch out into the blue without worrying who gets behind them; they are, on the contrary, extremely sensitive to any threat to their communications. Ambushed patrols were always badly shaken by fire put down on the path to their rear. As against this, the Jap showed remarkable courage and dash; he always attacked regardless of numbers, and brought all of his weapons into play with astonishing rapidity. Our columns were very strongly equipped with Bren-guns, machine-guns, and Tommy-guns, but throughout the campaign the rifle was the key weapon. In the hands of thoroughly trained soldiers, its accuracy, range, and hitting power were decisive.

Wingate made good his boast that he would "make any man who's fit a jungle fighter capable of coping with the best the Japanese have got," and the combat experience gained on the enemy's favourite terrain set a pattern of training and tactics for future land operations in Burma. Fighting side by side with sturdy little Gurkhas, with Kachins, Karens, and other loyal Burmese, a regiment of city-bred Englishmen—tinkers, tailors, and shopkeepers—showed the Jap that he was no longer master of the jungle.

The Wingate raid also gave the Allies a new insight into their Japanese enemy. "The Japanese," said Wingate in his report on the campaign,

thought they had found a technique of warfare in the jungles of the Far East to which the United Nations had no answer. With characteristic thoroughness and assiduity, they had not only studied the effects of jungle on all types of modern tactics, but had also trained large numbers of their best troops in the practical application of their approved methods. They boasted that the self-indulgent, ignorant troops of the United Nations could never equal them, either in skill or endurance, in the conditions of warfare that prevailed throughout their co-prosperity sphere. From Japan to India, from Manchuria to Australasia, jungle and mountain predominate and make penetration, the premier weapon in modern warfare, everywhere possible.

The Japanese were mistaken. The British soldier has shown that he can not only equal the Japanese, but surpass him in this very war of penetration in jungle. The reason is to be found in the qualities he shares with his ancestors: imagination, the ability to give of his best when the audience is smallest, self-reliance, and power of individual action. The Indian soldier, too, has shown himself fully capable of beating the Japanese in jungle fighting, where individuality and personal initiative are the qualities that count.

Believing that this was so, Field-Marshal Wavell gave me the task of raising and training a formation designed to carry out

penetration of the enemy's back areas far deeper and on a far larger scale than anything the Japanese had practised against us. Essential to Wavell's plan was air power not only superior to that of the enemy but capable of operating in new ways, of fulfilling hitherto unheard-of demands. We had such air resources. The R.A.F. never failed us. In fact, seeing in us the ideal opportunity of driving home their own strategic attacks on the enemy, they supplied R.A.F. contingents for every column. And it was largely the presence and work of these R.A.F. elements that made the operation a success.

The force that was to go into the heart of Japanese-occupied Burma and singe the Mikado's beard was not composed of selected troops; it consisted of ordinary British and Indian infantry, sappers, signalmen, and others. Each column also had its quota of Burmese troops; without the brave and devoted Burma Rifles the operation would have been impossible. What was it that made these ordinary troops, born and bred for the most part to factories and workshops, capable of feats that would not have disgraced Commandos? The answer is that given imagination and individuality in sufficient quantities, the necessary minimum of training will always produce junior leaders and men capable of beating the unimaginative and stereotyped soldiers of the Axis. Remember, too, that all over this theatre of war human beings feel that the United Nations are fighting for something that means more than the severe and macabre ideals of the Axis.

The Jap is no superman. His operational schemes are the product of a third-rate brain. But the individual soldiers are fanatics. Put one of them in a hole with a hundred rounds of ammunition and tell him to die for the Emperor—and he will do it. The way to deal with him is to leave him in his hole and go behind him.

Jungle warfare places a great demand for resourcefulness and endurance on the individual, who may be cut off from his comrades at any time. The Jap is not resourceful. He is assiduous, hard-working, courageous, and possesses tremendous energy, but he can't solve problems which he has never faced before. The city-bred Englishman, given the right kind of training, meets new and unexpected conditions with imagination and originality. Although not given to the humourless self-immolation of the Japanese, he has a stronger, saner heroism.

Most of us are waiting to renew our experience of this dull, ferocious, and poverty-stricken little enemy at the earliest possible moment. Some of us did not come back. They have done something for their country. They have demonstrated a new kind of warfare—the combination of the oldest with the newest methods. They have not been thrown away.

We have proved that we can beat the Jap on his own chosen ground. And as here, so will it be elsewhere.

For his leadership of the Burma Raid Wingate received a second bar to his D.S.O. "He displayed," said the terse report, "skill, personal courage, and endurance of a high order. He again proved himself an intrepid leader." Shortly after the campaign the Royal Central Asian Society awarded him the Lawrence of Arabia Memorial Medal for his exploits in Burma. Today people in England speak of Orde Wingate as "the New Clive."

POSTSCRIPT : THE END OF THE ROAD

AFTER the news of his spectacular Burma raid was released Wingate's plans and movements were hidden by an impenetrable censorship. For ten months he was a figure of mystery. Then, in the middle of March 1944, the headlines announced that a strong force of British and Indian jungle-commandos had landed far behind the Japanese lines in Northern Burma—an operation with the unmistakable Wingate stamp. A few days later New Delhi headquarters issued a terse report that this force was commanded by Major-General O. C. Wingate. That same week Wingate was killed in an air crash in Burma.

After Wingate's death the authorities saw fit to release details of the key role he had played in the conception and planning of the 1944 operations in North Central Burma.

The story goes back to the previous summer, when Wingate, then engaged in staff work in Imphal, received an urgent summons to London. At an airport in Southern England he was told that the Prime Minister expected him to dinner. He was hurried off to Downing Street wearing the clothes he was travelling in, slacks and a tropical bush shirt.

That evening Wingate and Mr Churchill discussed the idea of a second expedition into Burma, which would employ on a more ambitious scale Wingate's revolutionary tactics, with improvements suggested by the lessons learned in the February-May campaign. In addition to killing Japs and perfecting for use on a large scale this new pattern of jungle warfare, such an expedition might establish and possibly hold land-bases and aerodromes in the heart of enemy territory, thereby imperilling all Japan's military dispositions in Northern Burma. Among the improvements Wingate strongly commended to the Prime Minister was the support of a fleet of

ambulance planes to evacuate the sick and wounded; abandoning casualties to the Japanese would prove too severe a strain on morale.

After agreeing on the broad outlines of a second Burma raid Mr Churchill said, "We are leaving tomorrow for a conference, and I should like you to be there." He then asked if Wingate had seen his wife yet. Wingate explained that she was, at that moment, in a train on the way from Scotland, as he had rung her up when he landed. The Prime Minister picked up a telephone and gave instructions for the Scottish Express to be stopped.

Later that night Mrs Wingate was bundled off the train, and rushed away in a fast car to an undisclosed port. Next day the Wingates, husband and wife, met for the first time since he left for Burma, on a ship carrying the British delegation to Quebec.

Wingate's presence at Quebec remained secret, though it was hardly inconspicuous. Correspondents were never allowed to disclose the identity of the young brigadier who attended the conference in borrowed battle-dress—Wingate had found all the old uniforms in his London apartment riddled with moth holes.

At Quebec President Roosevelt and General George Marshall came under Wingate's spell. To them he outlined the plan which had taken shape at his dinner with Mr Churchill. Roosevelt and Marshall heartily endorsed the idea. An expedition such as Wingate envisaged could, if successful, sever the enemy's key north-south communications in Burma. This would prevent the Japanese from bringing up supplies and reinforcements to their troops in the north, and so would enable General Joseph Stilwell to push ahead more rapidly with construction of the Ledo Road, designed to open a new supply route into China.

Wingate was invited to the United States, where he visited war plants, sampled the latest dehydrated foods, inspected weapons and aircraft. Whatever he asked for was shipped to India. General Marshall was so impressed with his ideas on jungle warfare that he promised him all the air support his plans demanded, and later sent a force of picked American troops to be trained by him. This force, commanded by Brigadier-General Frank Merrill, has since won fame in the United States as "Merrill's Marauders." In March 1944, advancing with General Stilwell's forces down the Hukawng Valley, Merrill's Wingate-trained "Marauders" ambushed and cut to pieces a large section of the crack Japanese 18th Division, which had played a prominent role in the capture of Singapore.

The commander of the American air unit assigned to Wingate was Colonel Philip Cochran, a soldier-adventurer with a brilliant record as a fighter pilot in the Tunisian campaign, but probably more famous as the real-life model for "Flip Corkin," hero of one of America's most popular comic strips, *Terry and the Pirates*. The two men were instantly on easy terms together. Within a few days Wingate was calling Cochran "dear Phil." Cochran referred admiringly to his chief as "The Man." Later the pair became known throughout the India-Burma theatre as "The Wing and the Beard."

Back in India Wingate remained a figure of mystery—and for a very simple reason: it was essential that no inkling of what was afoot should leak through to the Japanese, who would naturally prepare for serious trouble if they learned that Wingate was planning another incursion into their backyard. When Lord Louis Mountbatten arrived in New Delhi to take up his command there, all his senior officers lined up to greet him. Wingate was among them, but the censor allowed no mention of his name. Even the news of his promotion to major-general was not released in India.

In October, just five months after getting out of Burma, Wingate again set up headquarters in the jungles of India's Central Provinces to put his troops through several months of intensive training. This time he was given a top priority for essential equipment. The survivors of the 1943 expedition provided a hard core of veterans for the far larger force now under Wingate's command, and most of the column commanders were promoted to brigadiers. The force was again divided into self-contained columns, which trained separately in isolated jungle camps scattered over an area of several hundred square miles. Wingate flew from one camp to another, almost daily, supervising every detail of the training.

The most spectacular innovation in the coming campaign was that the bulk of the force was to be airborne; only a few of the columns would repeat the gruelling trek over the Arakan Range down to the Chindwin and across the grain of Burma. Wingate's plan was to establish a jungle "beachhead" far behind the Japanese lines. The area selected was a valley south-east of Myitkyina—two hundred miles east of the Chindwin, twenty miles west of the China border, and approximately a hundred miles south of Stilwell's forces in the Hukawng Valley. This aerial "leapfrog" action would eliminate the painfully slow foot-slogging that had hitherto held back operations in the Burma theatre. It would be the first airborne

offensive in the war against Japan and the largest ever undertaken by the Allies on any front. If successful it might radically change the shape of all future operations in South-east Asia. The air support which General Marshall had promised Wingate made this daring undertaking feasible. Washington had provided Colonel Cochran with a fleet of gliders and transports, manned by hand-picked air-men, most of them decorated for outstanding achievements in other war theatres.

Not only in its tactical conception was the expedition of 1944 far ahead of the first Burma raid. The experience gained in the field had led to improvements in everything from transport to bootlaces. The air squadron was prepared to parachute to Wingate's men petrol-engined motor-craft for river-crossings, and to land mules and even tiny jeeps behind the enemy lines. Great strides had been made in the use of wireless communication; every column was so well supplied with the latest radio equipment and with skilled technicians that the danger of ever losing contact with base was virtually eliminated. Even in regard to minute details the experiences of the previous campaign had taught valuable lessons. Typical of Wingate's attention to such detail was a curious addition to the headdress of his troops: wound round his slouch hat each man wore several yards of leather bootlace, which, in an emergency, could serve as a tourniquet and might make the difference between life and death.

At the beginning of March one part of Wingate's force set out on foot from Imphal. In order to surprise the Japs the columns chose a route across the mountains never used before, even by patrols. They reached the Chindwin unobserved, crossed the river by motor-craft north of Tamianthi, and pushed secretly eastward across Burma.

March 5 was "invasion day" for the airborne units. British and American air and ground leaders met for a last-minute conference with Colonel Cochran to check final details. Then by means of loud-speakers the pilots were ordered to their posts, and the troops clambered swiftly into the long rows of gliders, the Gurkhas with their *kukris* swinging at their side. For a full thirty minutes the sky-trains circled the field to gain altitude before approaching the seven thousand feet peaks of the Arakan Yoma. For all the ground troops it was their first glider trip.

The first pilot to land was Flight Officer Jackie Coogan, the former boy film star. He jumped out and fired a light signal. Other gliders followed, carrying a small covering force and a contingent

of American engineers with jeeps, mules, shovels, and road graders. In the space of a few minutes British and Indian assault troops were patrolling the area, while the American engineers and glider pilots went to work building a regular landing-strip.

The operation was not without casualties. Several gliders crashed in the jungle, and the senior engineer officer was one of those killed. At dawn tiny "grasshopper" planes, flying at tree-top level and able to land in small clearings, located and picked up the wounded, who were treated at a first-aid station hastily organized by an American captain.

In the amazing space of twenty-four hours heroic toil had completed the first landing-strip. On the night of March 6 Brigadier-General William Olds, American commander of the troop-carrier command, landed the first of the huge twin-engined C-47 sky-trains on the rapidly constructed runway, and Wingate's raiders tumbled out into surroundings familiar to the veterans of '43. The previous year they had reached this point exhausted after two months of marching and fighting. This time they were fresh and ready for battle after a short and not particularly hazardous flight.

The following morning, during the period of peak activity, a transport arrived or took off every forty-seven seconds, landing troops, supplies, and heavy equipment, and ferrying the injured back to base. By evening the engineer contingent had made ready a second 3,000-foot runway in another valley a few miles away.

Back at the border air base, pilot Jackie Coogan remarked, "I sure would like to hear from those British and Gurkha knife artists I took into Burma. They were so eager to get at the Japanese I almost got trampled in the rush when they ran out of the valley I put them down in. I would like to have gone with them when the column pushed toward its objective. They're the toughest men I ever saw." The "knife artists" who invaded Burma from the skies in 1944 certainly bore little resemblance to the tenderfoot recruits assigned to Wingate the year before. This time Wingate's raiders were a *corps d'elite* of jungle fighters probably unmatched in the world.

Wingate's landing caught the Japanese napping. It took them eight days to wake up to the fact that a strong Allied offensive force had established itself within striking distance of the hub of their military position in Northern Burma, and was threatening their vulnerable north-south rail and river communications. By the time Japanese planes attacked the Allied jungle beachhead Spitfires

and fighter-bombers were based on the two aerodromes to cover the ground operations and aerial supply movements. Five of the attacking Japanese planes were shot down, and the rest quickly turned tail.

Within a few days Wingate's raiders had fanned out in all directions and were firmly astride the Mandalay-Myitkyina railroad at Indaw and Mawlu, thus once again severing the spinal cord of the enemy's communications system while simultaneously threatening river-borne traffic on the Irrawaddy above and below Katha. As General Marshall had hoped at the Quebec Conference, the Japanese facing Stilwell's American and Chinese troops were virtually cut off from supplies and reinforcements. At the same time the enemy troops in and around Myitkyina were threatened from another direction. The force of Kachin Levies under British officers, which Wingate's 1943 campaign had saved from annihilation, had pushed southward from Fort Hertz and Sumprabum, operating close to Stilwell's left flank, and had advanced to within thirty-two miles of Myitkyina.

This was the situation when Wingate, still wearing the famous old sun helmet of the Ethiopian and first Burma campaigns, made his first announcement to war correspondents from his headquarters out in the blue. "My plan," he said, "was to land where the enemy was not. There is now a strong British and Gurkha force some two hundred miles inside enemy territory. The first stage of the airborne operation has been completely successful. Everything we set out to do has been done." He paid high tribute to the "faith and enthusiasm" of Colonel Cochran, and concluded, "The Japanese are brave enough, but they're years behind us technically. Before you can kill Japs, you must have a sound strategic plan. But a small force, used imaginatively, will defeat them."

Three weeks after the original landing the raiders were spread out over a wide area, and Wingate was flying several hundred miles daily to supervise operations. The weather, for the time of the year, was exceptionally bad. The monsoon season was not due for six weeks, but high winds and heavy downpours had begun early in March.

On March 24 a tropical storm was raging when Wingate insisted on taking off in a Mitchell-25 bomber to visit one of his units. He did not reach his destination. That night a transport spotted a blaze high in the mountains. Colonel Cochran sent out scouting planes, which located the burned-out wreckage. A rescue party

discovered that all the bomber's occupants were dead. Orde Charles Wingate had reached the end of his road.

Wingate's death robbed the United Nations of one of their most brilliant leaders in the war against Japan, and Britain of a general who had succeeded in winning the unbounded admiration of the Allied world. In the United States, as well as in Britain and the Empire, "Wingate of Burma" was one of the great heroes of this war. He captured the imagination of the American public as only General Montgomery, among Britain's military leaders, had done before.

In a letter written several months before his death Wingate spoke of Burma as the third and unfinished chapter in his military career. At the time he seemed fated to write a triumphant finish to that chapter, to play in the reconquest of Burma a role perhaps even more decisive than the part he played in the liberation of Ethiopia. A plane crash on a desolate mountain-side denied him this logical climax to his years of championing desperate causes. The only vestige of consolation is that his last bold venture—like every operation he had planned and led—was, while he commanded it, "completely successful."

Wingate's peculiar brand of military genius was irreplaceable. A great rebel, he slashed through red tape, lashed out at the prejudices and complacency of "the military ape," and by dint of persistence and achievement saw his ideas endorsed by the highest-ranking strategists of the United Nations. An inspired planner with a bold but disciplined imagination, he was one of the few genuine tactical innovators on the Allied side. He conceived two campaigns unique in the annals of war—the first long-range penetration of enemy territory supplied exclusively from the air; the first large-scale airborne landing in enemy-held jungle and mountain terrain. To him goes much of the credit for putting into reverse the dismal story of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Rangoon.

Daring in conception, patient in preparation, magnificently effective in execution, Wingate was at the same time a dreamer and a supreme realist. While dreaming of the reconquest of Burma, he could remember to equip his men with tourniquets in the form of spare bootlaces. He knew how to plan a whole campaign, or kill a mule silently with a deft stroke of the knife. He showed how to enlist the sympathies and co-operation of the Burmese, and established a pattern for dealing with the natives of South-east Asia

which his successors would do well to follow. Above all, he was a great fighter, always ready to charge the enemy at the head of his men.

His death was a hard and bitter blow to the troops he commanded. Officers and men felt for him a respect and affection that amounted to hero-worship in the best sense. They had supreme faith in his leadership and a lively admiration for his conduct in the field. He had always shared with them, down to the humblest private, every hazard and hardship of jungle warfare, and, as one officer observed, "He seemed to do everything better than anyone else in the force."

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to Wingate, who achieved so much for the Jews of Palestine, the Ethiopians, and the conquered Burmese—certainly the tribute he would have liked best—is that of Mr. Michael Foote, who wrote in the *Evening Standard* at the time of Wingate's death: "He was a great man of God in the Old Testament sense, and a great Englishman. For the glory of England, the fact that has allied her name with that of freedom and humanity . . . is that such men as Wingate have gone forth to make their own the cause of some unhappy people, suppliant in its agony and looking to England as its champion."

The sum of Wingate's qualities made him one of England's finest figures. The "Lawrence" of Judea, Ethiopia, and Burma was not merely a military genius. He was something much rarer—a truly great human being.